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Restorative Sleep: Stories

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Restorative Sleep:

Stories

A Thesis

Presented to

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

In partial fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

Andrew Moreno

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From Lyssa

Patrick is lying on a hotel bed, shirtless in athletic shorts, belly button pointed at the ceiling. He is seventeen years old, six feet tall, black-haired, skin bleached by winter. This morning he weighed 181.7 pounds, but now it's evening and he's fed and hydrated and more like 186. His left hand is wrapped in athletic tape and pressed against his thigh, while his right grabs at the air above him. Tendons are visible through the skin of his forearm, sliding around like theatre rigging.

Patrick's eyes are closed but he's not sleeping. Parts of him push for sleep—bits of codeine and acetaminophen dissolving in his stomach, some post-adrenal drowsiness—but it's only seven o'clock, and he's not going to let a minor injury put him off his schedule.

He's reviewing a match, not his most recent one. The semifinals of last year's state tournament, when Derrick Severino beat him 5-3. The last time he lost, not including today. Patrick had been winning 3-2 going into the final period. He's thinking about that period, those last two minutes. It's something he does often,

more than once a day. He's watched the video dozens of times, sitting on the floor at the foot of his bed, staring at a 10" screen a couple feet from his face. He knows every movement, knows precisely the moment he lost.

Severino took a shot, and Patrick didn't get his feet back fast enough. That was it. He'd seen Severino's hips drop, his shoulders angle forward, and had willed himself to respond—but his muscles lagged. If he had sprawled a quarter second earlier things would have been different, but no. The problem was conditioning: he'd gotten tired. It's something he's been working on.

You can still work on it, he tells himself, you don't need your thumb for that.

After the ref had raised Severino's hand, Patrick went to the lockers, found a shower and twisted the handle so hard it broke. Stepped under the scalding water. He kept his head down, occasionally smacking one or both palms against the beige tiles, or turning so the water hit the back of his neck. He stayed there for twenty minutes.

"The fuck happened to you?" asked Coach when he came out.

Patrick's face and chest and arms were an ugly red during the third place match. The next day the skin started to flake.

He isn't thinking about that part, just the loss. This year he and Severino are ranked first and second at 182 pounds in 1A. They also live 250 miles apart, which means they won't see each other until the state tournament. Their rematch is never far from Patrick's thoughts. Not because he has anything against Severino, but because he needs to win state, and Severino is his only competition. Patrick needs to

win because second place in 1A won't get you a full scholarship. There are a lot of state tournaments, and few collegiate wrestling programs. *Fucking Title Nine*, Patrick thinks in the rare moments he considers it. He thinks he needs a scholarship because it's his easiest way out of Northeastern Iowa. He needs to get out of Northeastern Iowa for a lot of different reasons that he doesn't like to think about.

Unfortunately the codeine is screwing with the gating mechanisms in his brain, so the thoughts come regardless. Worries about his injured thumb, about the state tournament, about being trapped in his hometown; he pushes them to the back of his mind but every few minutes they float frontward and spike anxiety. Soon he loses track of the match with Severino, starts thinking instead of all the things that could go wrong in his life. His right hand stops moving and lies clenched beside him, same as the left. His jaw is tight. If it weren't for the painkillers he'd have a headache.

There's a beep and click from the hallway, the sound of the door sliding across the carpet. Patrick doesn't move, just opens his eyes and looks at the picture hanging behind him, above the bed. A watercolor harbor viewed from shore. He has never seen the ocean.

"You jerking off?" asks Brett.

Patrick feels a prick of irritation, lets it slide. "Nah," he says, raising his bandaged hand, waving it. "I wish."

"What, you bat lefty? Weird. You're a weird guy."

Patrick sits up, shrugs.

Brett is smaller than him, average-sized, dark blonde and prone to smirking. They've practiced together since they were small and this year they're captains, the best senior wrestlers at Lyssa HS. Because they're captains they share a room and each get their own bed—everyone else on the team sleeps four to a room—but they have little in common. Patrick is one of the top 182-pounders in the state, while Brett is maybe the second best 145-pounder in their county, wrestling mostly to satisfy family expectations. Patrick spends the off-season training, going to freestyle and Greco tournaments, working construction to build muscle. Brett spends summers running deliveries for his dad's farm supply and growing a belly that he runs off each October.

"Hey," Brett says, kicking off his shoes, "Me and Chase are going to Hooters in a minute, you coming?"

"Nah, pills got me so I can barely think."

"Yeah, what'd they give you? Got any extra?"

"T-3's. Weak shit, but I'm feeling 'em. And I'm not getting kicked off the team just so your dumb ass can get buzzed."

"All right dude, fuck, I was joking."

Patrick doesn't respond. He hadn't been serious either, but his voice doesn't always carry intention well. He hears the shower go as he sits on the edge of the bed, blinking at his knees. He can hear Brett moving, the plastic bathtub creaking under his weight. The image of this in his head startles him. He reaches for the remote, turns on the TV and stares at the motion, unable to follow. Singing starts from the

bathroom and Patrick turns up the volume. Brett sings louder.

"Oh my god, look at that face..."

Brett's enjoyment of Taylor Swift is well-known. It began as a way to annoy their coach, who likes to complain, "This sport is gay enough already," whenever anyone on the team wears a scarf or bleaches their hair. For the last couple of months Brett has been blasting Swift once or twice a week from a speaker in his locker, just to get a rise, a shout from the office, "*Turn it off, faggots.*" It's only recently that Brett's decided he actually likes Swift's music, and has learned the lyrics, mostly because he imagines girls will like that he listens to it. He has explained these things to Patrick, and anyone else who listen.

Patrick doesn't have strong feelings about the song, but he does not want to listen to Brett's singing. This is in part because his voice is terrible, a sort of permanently flat baritone, but mostly it's that the sound is forcing the image of Brett showering into Patrick's head. He's seen him naked hundreds of times, but for some reason it's getting to him today. Maybe the drugs and the hotel room, the fact that they're alone rather than surrounded by the rest of the team. It's not something he wants.

Patrick almost yells at him to shut up, but that would only make him sing louder. He grabs a towel and key and heads for the hallway.

Brett's voice follows him, until the lock clicks and cuts off the sound. He's still shirtless, but it doesn't bother him. The idea of being seen. Patrick knows what he looks like, knows the reaction people have to his body. The slight awe in faces he

runs past during the summer.

Alas, the hallway is empty, but the quiet is also nice, the faded green carpet under his toes, towel rough on his shoulder. The codeine continues to work on him, pleasantly now, soft-lit corridors reminding him of family vacations to Okoboji and the Ozarks, places they went to when his mom was still around.

As he approaches the door to the pool there is a sound of high-pitched echoing voices. He considers turning back and wandering through the hotel for a while, but that would be pointless, and Patrick doesn't like pointless things.

Inside, two small children are splashing and laughing, buoyed by inflatable clothes, their hairy father chasing them around the pool. He hopes they will leave soon. Fortunately the hot tub and sauna are in a separate space, partitioned by a brick planter rowed with ferns and bushes. Blurry outlines of bodies are visible through the fogged glass of the sauna door—probably wrestlers. The finals and third place matches will be held in the morning, which means new weigh-ins for the kids still in the tournament, which means losing all the liquid they've drunk since weigh-ins this morning, the liters of Gatorade and Pedialyte. They'll be sitting with bottles of water, not for hydration but to toss on the hot rocks, each with a library card or driver's license to scrape the sweat from their skin. Push-ups and sit-ups on the hot wooden benches. Patrick has been there before.

Not today, though. He turns on the jets and slips into the tub, water not as hot as he'd like but at least there's no one else in it. He submerges himself entirely, except for the bandaged left hand, which sticks straight out of the water like a buoy.

Thirty seconds later his eyes rise above the bubbles and glare at the athletic tape.

There are injuries you can fight through—Patrick has wrestled on a torn MCL, feigned wellness after a concussion in order to finish a match—but the thumb thing is different, it needs to heal. You can't wrestle if you can't grip.

He knew it was going to be a problem the moment it happened, could feel it as he lay on the mat, reeling not so much from pain as from fear that his season was over.

It's only a month, he tells himself, you'll be back in time for districts. You're fine.

It shouldn't have happened. Some kid from Altoona who he'd never heard of, with a body like a loaf of bread, patchy stubble, acne on the lower part of his face running down a dewlapped neck, no Adam's apple. Not a wrestler, just a kid on a wrestling team.

Through some combination of luck on his part and indifference on Patrick's, the kid made it through the first period unpinned. Down 2-9, but still in the match. He won the coin flip and chose referee's position, top. An act of desperation, of hoping against long odds that he'd be able to turn his opponent and pin him. Patrick sneered as he got onto his hands and knees, felt the kid's weight settle on him, his arm curl around his waist.

The whistle blew and Patrick stood instantly, almost simultaneous with the sound, shrugging the kid off like he wasn't there. Patrick is a real wrestler and these movements are innate. But the kid wasn't a real wrestler, so instead of standing to grapple like a man he dove for Patrick's feet, hoping to keep him on the ground—as

though he wouldn't just stand up again. Another act of desperation, which was fine, or should have been. The problem was in the way Patrick landed: on his thumb rather than the heel of his palm. The digit stretched further than it was made to, back towards his wrist, and Patrick shrieked and curled up and clutched his hand.

The kid didn't realize what had happened and kept going, grabbing at Patrick's shoulders, but the ref saw and stopped the action. Patrick stayed down, wondering how bad it was.

When he opened his eyes Coach was coming toward him. He took a breath, rolled to his knees. Took another and stood up, pushing off the ground with his right hand, keeping the left close to his chest.

"You okay?" asked coach, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Sure," Patrick said, looking at his thumb, trying to move it. Wincing. "Sure."

"You gonna lose to this fucking pud?"

"No," he said, wiping his eyes with his good hand. Coach nodded and turned back to his corner.

The ref came up to Patrick. "Good to go?"

"Yeah."

"You sure? All right."

Patrick jumped up and down a few times, shaking his head, moving his thumb a bit. It hurt a lot. *This fucking pud*, he thought. He got back down on his hands and knees, another shot of pain as his left hand touched the mat. *This fucking pud*, he whispered through clenched teeth, breath hissing in and out. His jaw was so

tight that his cheeks twitched.

The kid from Altoona, still not quite sure what had happened, looked to the ref before settling back on top, putting his arm again around Patrick's stomach—he could feel him shivering. The whistle blew.

This time Patrick exploded upward with so much force that when he turned around the kid was still stumbling backwards. Patrick closed the distance and punched his arms under the kid's armpits, pulled him over his hip and spun through the air before hurling the kid onto the mat, hard enough that there were shouts from the bleachers.

When the kid came out of it a few seconds later a trainer was jogging toward him and Patrick was heading for the locker rooms, breath ragged.

Patrick didn't mind getting booted from the tournament—the injury had ended it for him anyway—and it doesn't bother him that he gave the kid a concussion. Not that he feels it was justified, he just doesn't think of it in those terms. To him it was an act of devotion, of dedication to the sport. This interpretation is supported by assistant coaches and teammates who've been talking about it all day, telling him "You fucked that guy *up*," or "Remind me never to make you angry." Coach was the only one who had anything bad to say about it.

"If you'd done that in the beginning you wouldn't be here," he'd told Patrick while driving him to the hospital. "That's what you get for playing with your food." Patrick nodded but continued looking out the passenger window. Lesson learned.

But has he learned in time? This is what's worrying him as he sits in the hot tub, staring at his thumb, resisting the urge to test it. Four to six weeks for the ligaments to heal. A month and a half of lost practices, of Derrick Severino getting further and further ahead of him. Patrick will run, spin, lift, work with the practice dummies, drill as much as the trainer lets him. But it's not the same as wrestling.

Visions of losing state, of missing the finals, of not even placing run through his head. And what if it takes longer to heal, or doesn't heal right? What if there's no scholarship and he has to stay in Lyssa and go to juco? It's a horrible thought. Horrible because he'd have to live with his father. Horrible because of the people in Lyssa. Horrible because the nearest queer community of any size is in Des Moines, 90 miles away.

Patrick's not sure if he's gay, but he's certainly gotten tired of girls, at least the girls at his school. These days when he thinks of sex he thinks about a boy from the University of Nebraska's summer wrestling camp. They hadn't done anything: some lingering contact after whistles were blown, repeated touching of shoulders and knees as they sat against the padded walls, sweating and hydrating. It could have been incidental, maybe just the way Nebraska kids do things—some days Patrick is sure that's all it was—but it doesn't matter, the experience has enlarged in his mind, grown to the point where it's all that he thinks of when he is aroused. But there is no outlet, so Patrick avoids arousal. He has blocked the boy on Facebook. He focuses on wrestling.

That doesn't mean he's going to wait another year to figure out what he

wants. He sure as hell isn't going to figure it out while living with his father in a town of 300 people. But if he doesn't get a scholarship...

The thought of another year in Lyssa, of farm work and odd jobs, is enough to push him out of the hot tub and through the halls, back to his now-empty hotel room. He changes into clean shorts and shirt, pulls on his running shoes, then he's back out and jogging down the hallway; no dawdling this time. His thoughts are a minute or two ahead of him, already in the fitness center.

It's empty when he arrives, and he stretches briefly before getting on the treadmill. He might not be able to wrestle but he can train. Starts off at 8 mph and works from there, running sprints and simulated hills. He wants to run every thought out of his head and replace them with his determination to win state and get the fuck out of Lyssa. His steps and breathing are heavy and even, and together they throw him into a sort of hypnotic state. In the eight months since his loss to Severino, eight months of daily workouts, Patrick has found a comfortable space right at the edge of overexertion. A place that knocks distractions right out of his head. That's where he's going.

30 minutes on the treadmill, 20 on the stationary bike's highest resistance, he tries some Nautilus but his thumb is too painful so instead he works on his core, crunchies and bicycle kicks and squat jumps. Then another two miles on the treadmill, fast as he can. By the time it's over his mind is almost blank, just a tinge of self-satisfaction, of accomplishment. There is a door to a drained outdoor pool and he goes out, still breathing hard. His shirt and shorts are soaked, as though he's been

swimming, and when the 20 degree air hits he starts billowing steam like an open pot. He is encased in a little cloud as catches his breath, smile on his face as he looks over the white metal fence at the parking lot, the few cars and piles of dirty snow.

It takes three or four minutes for him to cool down, for the air around him to clear. He waits until he starts to feel the cold before heading back inside.

Turning, he sees Squeak staring at him through the fitness center window. Squeak's the team's 119 pounder, a sophomore, all bones and tendons with hair down to his shoulders. He wins more than he loses, but only just. They keep their eyes on each other as Patrick enters. A purple sauna suit peeks from the collar of Squeak's Iowa State sweatshirt. Illegal, technically, but everyone has one.

"You wrestling tomorrow?" Patrick asks.

"Yeah."

"Nice." Top four is a good finish for him. "How much you gotta lose?"

"Two and a half. Three."

"You gonna make it?"

"I think so. It's gonna be close."

"Well, good luck," Patrick says, turning to leave.

"You too," Squeak replies, stepping onto the treadmill.

#

Walking back to the room he thinks about calling his dad and telling him about the hand, but he won't be in in any state to understand. Not on a Saturday night with his son out of town. Patrick wonders if the drinking is getting worse or if

he's just noticing it more. Either way, it makes him hard to talk to.

It's especially hard to talk to him about leaving Lyssa, because he'll want to know why. Not that Patrick's afraid of telling him he might like guys—his dad's not the sort of person who would care, probably—he just doesn't think the old man would be able to keep his mouth shut. And if he talked about it at the bar, then the whole town would know, and that would mean the wrestlers would know. Patrick doesn't exactly care what they think, but if word got out on the state wrestling message boards—and that's just the sort of shit that gets posted there—then the colleges would know too.

This is Patrick's real fear. It's easy for him to imagine a chain of events whereby talking to his father about this, talking to anybody, leads to him losing a chance at a scholarship. That isn't something he feels he can risk. He *needs* to get out of Lyssa.

Patrick is a little maudlin when he gets back to his room. He showers and gets into bed. Turns on the TV and this time pays some attention, trying to follow the squabbles of a wealthy family in Connecticut. At some point he attempts to measure the lives of the show's children against his own, but can't find any points of comparison. Still he goes on watching.

Eventually he is almost but not quite sleeping, thoughts weird but still tangentially related to his surroundings and the action on the TV. The reality stars are surrounding him, chattering, drawing him in...when he hears voices in the hallway. The door beeps and clicks and opens. Patrick takes a deep breath and

pretends to sleep. Brett's coming in, laughing. And strange there is other laughter too, female. This strangeness surges through Patrick like an alarm, but his eyes stay closed.

"This time I know you're jacking it," Brett says with a laugh. "Don't even front."

Patrick considers throwing the blanket off, showing his jeans. Instead he blinks and sits up, and waits for an explanation as to what the fuck is going on. He leans back on his arms, or tries to: a shock of pain brings his injured hand up across his stomach.

"This is Rachel. *Rachelle*," says Brett, noticing nothing, stepping aside to let her through. "She is a waitress."

Rachelle laughs again as Patrick looks at her. Chinless with pinpricks of acne running from her mouth to her chest, she reminds him of the kid from Altoona, only instead of translucent-pale skin she has an orange tan and heavy makeup around her eyes, and is thin rather than blockish. But their faces seems the same. She can't be more than a year or two older than they are.

"She told me she likes big guys," Brett explains in a stage whisper, "so I told her about you. See?" he says, turning to Rachelle. "Told ya. Patty here's a beast."

"Yeah, you weren't lying," she says. Her voice is raspy and nasal at the same time. "What happened to your hand?"

"I fell on it wrong."

Patrick watches as she and Brett sit down on the bed across from him. He

realizes he should say something more, shakes his head to wake himself up.

“Sorry,” he says. “I’m a little doped.”

“Yeah? Anything good?” she asks, eyes flickering. “Got any left?”

He stares at her, repressing an urge to grab her and shake.

Brett, maybe sensing his mood, starts talking about the match. Patrick breathes, tries to get away from anger, fades out, back in.

“...but he finished the match. He took that kid apart. This guy’s scary when he’s angry. You are, bro,” he adds, looking at Patrick, who nods back.

“I could never do anything like that,” says Rachelle, looking from one boy to the other. And Patrick understands that she wants something from him and that Brett wants something from her, and that something is forming in the room.

While he’s thinking this Rachelle is talking about how she used to be a cheerleader, back in high school, and Brett’s arm has moved around her lower back, and she’s still looking at Patrick, who is looking from her to Brett, trying to understand what’s going on, what’s going to happen. He is imagining Brett again, not in the shower this time, with the girl, and with him, maybe with him. He’s not sure if that’s going to happen, he doesn’t like Brett, but he’s looking at him now, when Rachelle reaches across the bed and puts her hand on Patrick’s knee, and his features spasm, just a little, and he looks back at her.

She sees that something is wrong. Though she keeps talking like nothing has happened, after a few seconds she withdraws her hand, and says she needs to pee. Patrick feels nausea at the thought of doing anything with her. The idea of Brett

doing anything with her. That she is in his hotel room is not tolerable. The hand on his knee has driven uncertainty out of his head, but it takes a minute to put this into words. He looks at Brett's mattress, then looks at Brett, who is smiling at him.

"Hey Brett," he says quietly, "I'm tired. I'm really tired. You need to get her out of our room. You wanna do something with her, do it somewhere else."

Brett's face shows surprise, as though this were unbelievable. "Seriously, Patty," he whispers, "this girl's down for whatever. What's the point of being captains if we don't enjoy it? Don't be such a fag."

It might be Patrick's imagination, but that last bit seems more earnest than the rest of Brett's bullshit. He finds himself on his feet.

"What?" he asks, stepping towards Brett. He is not talking quietly now. "What the fuck did you say?"

Brett stands too, but to retreat, raising his hands, almost running into Rachelle as she comes out of the bathroom. She stands behind him. Their eyes are very wide and focused on Patrick.

"Hey dude, easy, easy. It was a joke, I know you're tired." Brett takes a step forward and claps Patrick on his bare shoulder. Patrick does not respond, just stands breathing loudly through his nose.

"It's fine," Brett continues, "We'll go hang with Chase and Ty, they got drinks."

Patrick nods, waits for them to leave.

"Get some rest, Patty," Brett says as he steps into the hallway. "Be well."

"Bye, Patty," says Rachelle. Her voice sounds much more normal now.

Something runs through him as the door closes, similar to what he felt earlier in the day, after he threw the kid from Altoona. A sort of satisfaction. Which is nice but it's also woken him up, and he doesn't want to be awake anymore. He gets the sleeve of Tylenol 3's from his bag and pops a couple tablets from their foil sheet, swallows them dry. It's funny, he thinks, the way everyone around him makes him feel worse, and yet he still doesn't want to be alone.

He lies in bed with his eyes half open, waiting for the pills to kick in. Watching TV and trying hard to think about nothing.

Not Stupid, Desperate

A baby is screaming in the seat behind him. Its mother shushes and sings softly, but the noise doesn't stop, so Arthur stands to leave. Rows of recumbent bodies, weakly lit by the guidelights of the aisle, sleep or pretend to sleep in hopes that pretense will invite the real thing. The baby's thin voice has opened a few eyes, but they close as Arthur passes.

He walks to the observation car, which is empty except for a man snoring and

slipping out of his chair beside a bottle of Ten High. There's a temptation to take the bottle and finish it, a temptation Arthur resists by sitting as far away as possible and not looking in that direction. The car is walled with broad windows that stretch onto the ceiling. Outside is plain dark, no horizon, a few farm lights shining at unguessable distances. The outward-facing seats don't lean back but that's fine. He falls asleep quickly. At some point an attendant wakes him, apologizes for waking him, and asks to see his ticket. Otherwise he's left alone.

Next morning the scenery is like dreamless sleep, all undifferentiated flatlands, purgatorial. Dakotas somewhere, full of low lying crops he can't quite make out. His eyes are getting worse, maybe. He stares.

In the dining car he's seated at a booth with three fat Wisconsinites. The women hardly ever take trains, but the man is a great enthusiast and has been all over America with his enthusiast friends.

"It really gives you time to think about the country," the man says.

"Do you like thinking about the country?" Arthur asks.

The man takes a few seconds to consider, chewing, the longest he's been silent since Arthur sat down.

"Heh. Well, I like thinking about what it used to be. And what it could be," he says, eyes on Arthur's as though it were a question, a serious one.

"So where are you headed?" asks his wife. She seems like she wants to talk about something else.

"Spokane."

“Beautiful city. *Beautiful* city,” says the man, who’s been everywhere. “What for?”

“Graduate school,” Arthur lies. He lies because they remind him of his parents, and telling them he’s going for a girl seems childish. Self-destructively optimistic in the way of children.

“That’s great! *Fantastic!* What kinda grad school?”

“I’m studying to be a physician’s assistant.” It’s something he’d like to do, if things work out. His lies are often based in some form of aspirational truth. “I was working as a nurse back in Rockford,” he adds, which is true but he doesn’t want to talk about it. “What about you guys?”

Teacher, paralegal, and of course the man’s a retired office manager. The conversation stays on them for a while, happily. Kids, vacations, inside jokes, how one of them got cancer and they all pulled together as a family. Then the man asks Arthur what he thinks of Scott Walker. But Arthur doesn’t have an opinion.

“It’s terrible what he did,” says the teacher, the man’s sister. “Just terrible.”

“Yeah, terrible the way he’s trying to get us to live within our means,” says the man.

“Live within our means. Is that what he’s doing?” she replies. “I didn’t realize.”

Arthur listens to them argue for a couple minutes, which seems like a polite amount of time, then signals for the check. Learning that his coffee refills were not free, he realizes that he will never return to the dining car, that he is seeing it for the

last time.

When he gets back to his seat the mother and baby are gone, replaced by an old woman swaddled in throw blankets. His seatmate acknowledges his return with a nod, then looks back to his phone. Feeling a bit less chatty today, it seems.

Nisan is thin with wiry gray hair, bald on top. An Iraqi refugee, Arthur doesn't know from what, though yesterday evening he saw him looking at a website with a star of David in the corner. Maybe Iraq used to have Jews, who knows. What he knows is that Nisan asked him the evening before what he thought the meaning of life was.

"I don't mean in a Christian, or Muslim, or whatever kind of way. I just think there has to be some kind of meaning for us to be here."

"I don't think about that sort of thing much."

"But you must have some idea. You are a smart man, you have education. You must have thoughts."

"I think some ideas are too big for words to fit them. Words are small things."

"I think the meaning of life is the living of it," said Nisan, smiling.

"Sure, that sounds right. I like that."

Today they don't talk. Arthur naps, dreaming he's on a beautiful deserted island. But as he explores it he runs into unpleasant acquaintances, former coworkers, one after another. They insist on following him, complaining and critical, like an inverted game of sardines.

Nisan wakes him in order to get out of his seat; they're about to reach his

stop. Somewhere in the middle of nowhere. He takes a bag from overhead and heads for the exit, no goodbyes. Arthur doesn't mind. He is thinking about the people from his dream, the people he's leaving.

He'd developed a reputation at the hospital over the last year or two. He knew why, recognized in himself a growing distaste for his co-workers, a prickliness towards them. Their cynicism bored him, such an easy card to play. The stories of patients murdering themselves. Stories about men and women who died or wrecked their lives through incaution, or gross stupidity, or stubbornness. One, told by a bearded EMT in his early twenties, a day before Arthur's last day of work, concerned an elderly woman in a car accident. A paramedic had felt a tautness while palpating her stomach, indicating that the abdominal cavity was filling with blood—but she refused to take off her clothes. No one could convince her otherwise. The doctors had to wait for her to pass out before they could operate.

"So of course she died. Idiot," the EMT concluded, like it was the punchline to a joke.

Arthur gave the man a little smile, then looked back to his computer. He didn't mind the grimness, it was the way they all leaned into it that got to him. Especially the young ones.

He hopes the hospitals in Spokane will be different, but it hardly seems likely. He'll wait and see. It's not why he's going, anyway.

#

Arthur wakes again in the early afternoon. The sky outside is unvaried gray, the kind of cloud that seems like it must cover the whole country, the whole planet.

Fields of pale yellow and pale green might convey the nobility of their tenants, if Arthur hadn't grown up with such people, didn't know them to be just like everyone else, same smallness. One of the strangest things about humans is how sure they are that other people are different. As far as he can tell we all might as well be family. Or maybe, he thinks, that's why everyone wants so much to be special.

Recognizing this as a silly line of thought he stands to shake it off. Heads for the observation car, back to the observation car. Now the upper floor with its huge, arching windows is full of teenagers playing cards and adults sipping water and coffee, eyes on the endless repetition of scenery. There may be nothing to see, but motion, like fire, can catch human attention and hold it for hours. How many are regretting they didn't spring for airfare?

Downstairs is an overpriced snack bar and two tables, one unoccupied. Arthur sits. At the other table are two guys in their forties, one fat with glasses, the other sporting a goatee and sleeve tattoos. They're talking about their jobs with the railroad, about how they'd never pay to take the train and fly their families everywhere, about some recent derailment. One offers the other a bag of potato chips, which is declined and then passed to Arthur.

"Thanks. Are derailments common?"

"Not bad ones. The news only cares about bad ones. They happen more than that."

"And always in threes," says the other, "like celebrity deaths. Actually we just had three last month."

“Yeah, but nothing serious, just freighters, you don’t hear about those unless something explodes.”

They describe the mechanics of it, the broken tracks and bent flanges, how the company always blames the conductor when they should blame the rails, how every other country in the world does trains better than us. They are happy to explain, almost eager. Arthur enjoys the way they talk at him without asking questions or inquiring into his life. When they start on animals their trains have hit, cattle and frozen deer, he tells them about a night bus he was on in Mexico that ran into a horse and how the passengers all got out to stare at the twitching body, listen to its whine.

“Then we got back on and the guy drove over it to make sure it was dead. Bump bump, and we kept on going.”

They listen with interest, and when he’s finished they continue talking about trains and their lives in the train town of Havre, Montana, and the railmen they’ve known. He can tell they know how to have these sorts of conversations, how to be friendly and entertaining with people they’ll never meet again. It makes Arthur feel very male, adult male.

After an hour Joe, the fat one, in an open marriage which he and his wife explore on their biannual trips to Las Vegas, stands and wanders off. Bill does not acknowledge his departure and continues explaining to Arthur the tattoos that garland not only his arms but also, he says, his entire body. Like all the men in his family. He has a wife and three kids. His best friend makes custom knives and sells

them to Seals for a living. Last year he and his buddies started a small motorcycle club, this year they're going to Sturgis. The train begins to slow.

"So what's up with all the Amish?" Arthur wants to know, nodding to a couple on the platform outside.

"Oh, those aren't Amish, they're Hutterites. You see the polka dots on the woman's scarf? You get a lot of them on here. They don't like buses or planes, too modern. I remember back when I was in school, the colony by Havre, I guess there weren't enough families, not enough fresh blood, so they'd pay guys from town to come out and fuck their young ladies. But they had to have chaperones, like their grandfather or uncle in the room while it was happening. To make sure the girls weren't enjoying it—the guys could enjoy it but not the girls. If you wanted beer money you just had to drive out to the right farm and knock. I mean, I never did—I had a girlfriend, my first wife—but my friends went all the time."

Is it a true story, or a legend Bill has mistaken for truth? There's no reason to discern. Arthur's happy to just listen, asking only those questions necessary to advance the monologue. He feels it justifies all the empty hours he's spent traversing the nothingness at the center of North America.

#

Sometime after Bill has detrained Arthur sits upstairs in the same seat he slept on the night before. They've just passed Browning, Montana and will soon enter Glacier National Park, leaving Big Sky behind. He is waiting for that moment, the arrival of scenery.

Because he's feeling good, sanguine, from the movie he just watched, *The General*, from listening to Bill, from the sun exposing itself for the first time since he boarded—because of all this he decides this is a good time to think about what he's doing.

#

"You're gonna have to explain your name," he'd said. "I mean, you don't have to, but I'd really like it if you did."

"Well my parents named me Hana, which is Japanese for flower. But I changed it to Han because it's universal for badass."

She managed to make the line sound unpracticed. He wondered how many times she'd said it. Still. They were in Guanajuato, on a hotel balcony overlooking the city, colonial architecture so colorful in the sunset it seemed televised. A little on the nose, sure, but he was charmed by it, let himself be charmed by it, the fairytale first meeting. They have to happen to someone, he figured.

They slept together that night, spent the next day with each other, decided to travel together to the coast. On the way to Guadalajara their bus hit a pinto mare and they got out with the other passengers to watch it die. Two days later in Puerto Vallarta they sat and drank and watched tourist children play on the beach.

"They look delicious," Arthur observed.

"If only we were cannibals," she said, "but we are tragically moral. At least I am." She looked at him.

After returning to the states they kept in irregular contact until March, when

in a moment of shared loneliness they began to message daily, then Skype, then a meeting in Denver for Fourth of July weekend. When Han suggested he move to Spokane Arthur felt a surge of such positive emotion that he could not say no.

The train hits the mountains and Arthur thinks of Han. Her skill with contained physical expression is wonderful and their video chats were often disrupted by his fascination with her movements. He has told her more than once that she should start a Youtube channel.

“You could talk about art, or metal, or whatever. The way you move makes everything interesting.”

Han blushed—even the blush seemed graceful to him, articulate—and said that she was too shy and besides, what a stupid idea it was, selling your personality to strangers.

“Plus, they don’t pay enough for what I got,” she said, still blushing.

She’s a welder, used to be an artist but now is a welder who makes art as a hobby. The abandonment of creative ambition is something they have in common. Back in college Arthur had thought for a while that he would be a writer. Han had made a more serious go of it, living briefly for art, but in the end decided it wasn’t what she wanted to do and got her MIG/TIG certification.

“Because I like working with my hands. I like fixing things, and putting things together.”

She looks the part, too. Dark red hair and broad shoulders, she weighs probably a little more than Arthur and looks so much like Rosie the Riveter that on

Halloween she can put on a bandana and overalls and everyone gets it. Just a little more muscle than the girl in the poster, a slightly more mannish face.

Arthur appreciates this as well, how suited she is to her chosen profession. Part of what stopped him writing in the first place was an understanding that he wasn't interested in inventing stories so much as leading a story-like life. He'd switched to nursing school less because he thought he would like the work than because he felt it suited his character. The idea of a feminine male nurse pairing with a masculine female welder is appealing to him. He has not told Han any of this, or only as a joke.

He's still reminiscing when the train hits the tunnel and his window becomes a mirror. The action of mirrors usually doesn't create a doubling so much as a division, splitting a person into both audience and actor. Arthur is filled with the sense of this split as he stares at himself. Long pale face, slim tall body, fine hands, one of which he raises self-consciously, trying to understand how his movements appear to others. As a student he'd dated two girls in the anime club, and both had told him he looked like a character drawn in the style of Satoshi Kon. Slender with a face somewhere between equine and vulpine. Staring at his quivering reflection he imagines it is a drawn version of himself, wonders what its movie would look like.

The tunnel goes on, his ears pop. An elderly woman sitting nearby tells her companion that it's the third longest rail tunnel in America, passing under two mountains. Arthur, thinking of the Mines of Moria, smiles. *It's my doom, I think, to go to that shadow yonder.* Though he has no Shire to protect, though his motives are

purely selfish and no fallen angel opposes his passage, for a moment he sees himself as Frodo and feels great sympathy for himself.

The last time Arthur stared at himself this long, not shaving or brushing his teeth but just looking, he had told himself that this was it. In the small clean bathroom of his small clean apartment on an evening two weeks ago he had promised himself that if things didn't work out in Spokane then it would just be over. He knew he could not tell Han this or even suggest it, but he was tired.

#

Awake. Back in his seat, an attendant tapping his shoulder.

"We're coming up on Spokane," says the small sleepy woman.

"Next stop Spokane Intermodal Center," a soft male voice reiterates over the intercom. *"Please return to your assigned seats. Cars one through six continue to Seattle, seven through ten go to Portland."*

The train arrives at 2:40 a.m. and Han is waiting at the station. They embrace, kiss, stand by the conveyor until his bags appear. Talk awkwardly of small things and fill the breaks with giggles. Drive home and fall asleep quickly, holding tightly as though each were the other's childhood toy, unlikely symbols of impossible safety.

#

Han is one of those people who can ignore the rising sun, sleep with the light slipping through her blinds. Arthur is not. He looks at her for a bit, not thinking anything, just full of a sense of rightness that he doesn't question because why would he? He'll take what he can get.

He decides to make coffee. While doing this he admires the structure of the kitchen, the plywood cabinets and gray-green tile. Waiting for the water to boil he explores the main room. It's obvious she's an artist: her apartment is full of beautiful things. His had been full of posters that he threw away when he left. Nice, but meaningless to him.

When the coffee is ready he pours a cup and takes it to the balcony, lovely the night before. Sliding back the curtained door, he steps outside...and immediately retreats as dust and ash are blown into his face. He closes the door and blinks, is still for a moment. Then he goes out again, this time with slitted eyes: fascinated. The city is clouded, sun the color of bloody urine. It reminds him of Beijing, which he had visited once with his high school Chinese class. *Why would they take us to this place?* he had wondered, and next semester switched to Spanish.

"It's the fires," Han says from behind him, "I told you about the forest fires, remember? And now they're kicking up dirt. It's terrible. Terrible and lovely."

"Just like you."

"Just like me."

They both laugh at the bad joke, but he suspects that under the laughter she's just as afraid or mortified as he is. She goes for coffee. Arthur leans over the railing, staring down at the empty sidewalk below.

He spits before heading inside to refill his cup.

#

She takes him to the apartment where he'll be staying, just a couple miles

from her own. It belongs to a friend who's in Europe till October. The idea is that Arthur will stay there for the first month or so, then if things are going well he'll move in with Han. They want to be practical.

It's a lot more like the apartment he left in Rockford than Han's apartment. Prints instead of movie posters, but the same impersonal aesthetic. This does not make him feel at home. As he looks around, Han goes into the bathroom, flushes, and comes out wheeling a bicycle.

"So, welcome to Spokane," she says, and stands on tiptoe to kiss him.

"It's amazing," he says. "It's the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me."

And it is. She has spent the last two months crafting it from spare parts. The frame, bright red, is etched and painted to look like streams of red blood cells, punctuated in a few spots by metallic leukocytes and bacteriophages welded together in combat.

"How did you make it?"

"You know. Elbow grease, a little help from my friends. It was fun."

"They'll love it at the hospital," Arthur observes as they lie down on her friend's couch.

#

The evening air isn't great but it's better than it was. Good enough, they decide, to bicycle to the gallery where Han's friend is having an opening. They take a path along the river.

"This must be amazing when the weather's clear," he says. It's pretty nice

now, despite the dust shading everything, the trees and grass.

"It really is. Just stay away from the water. You can't even swim in it." She laughs, "It'd be like swimming in mercury."

There are a few other people on the trail, seniors and young women with small children. They stare at his bike as he passes. It's not something that can go unnoticed. He tries to imagine what he looks like, pedaling a bright red piece of art. Wonders if he'll get used to it, or if he'll always be aware of the eyes on him, the voices of children. *Mom, look!*

It's okay. It's worth it. He tries to think of what he can give her to match the bike. He's not an artist, cannot directly manifest his desire, or gratitude, or love. Jewelry, then? She doesn't wear much and anyway it would be too banal, too impersonal. Maybe he could take her somewhere, somewhere special but not too far away, just for a weekend. But where? She knows this place so much better than he does. It's something he'll have to figure out (he's already thinking about it).

They pass a couple of stick-thin homeless men fishing under a bridge.

"Not a good idea, guys," Han calls. "The water's poison."

They don't look up and she doesn't look back.

#

It starts out fine. Han has some pieces in the main gallery, child-sized sculptures of looped and curling steel, painted and polished and rusted in parts. She finds raw material at junkyards and takes scrap from jobsites. He doesn't ask what they're supposed to mean, though he wants to know. He's pretty sure you're not

supposed to ask questions like that.

“They’re incredible,” he tells her. “It’s so different seeing them up close, they have so much more texture than the photographs. What do you see when you’re making them?”

“Carnivorous flowers,” she says, smiling in a way that makes him think it’s not really true, that it’s a joke instead of an answer. He laughs.

A lot of people she introduces think at first that Arthur is just a friend. That’s fine. He’s used to people mistaking him for gay and often plays along with it just because. He’s glad that he isn’t, since it would fit a little too perfectly, and caricatures are boring, but he doesn’t mind if people think he is. Not a problem. It’s when her friends understand that he and Han are in some way together that they make him uncomfortable.

“You’re a lucky guy,” they tell him when Han is drawn briefly away. “She’s a fucking treasure.” A man says this, but the women are just as emphatic, telling him how talented she is, how special. They all love her in a way that does not make sense to him, as though she were everyone’s favorite. Perhaps it’s just the way they talk in this place, but he doesn’t believe that.

He can’t understand it. It doesn’t make sense that she reached out to him, if she had all these friends at home. Why not find someone here? Arthur is strange but not special, he knows this about himself, and worries that Han has misjudged him. That he is going to disappoint her.

She introduces him to a couple of writers she knows.

“Arthur used to write,” she tells them, confirming in his mind that she has mistaken his reticence for modesty.

“Not really, just a little in college,” he says, looking away.

There is a pause before conversation continues. After a couple of minutes Han walks off and Arthur stays, not wanting to seem clingy. One of the writers continues talking about a memoir she’s working on.

“People think nonfiction is easy, but it’s not. It’s really not. You have to make the truth not only interesting but believable, which is super challenging.”

“Huh,” Arthur says with a grin, “I heard somewhere that the difference between nonfiction and fiction is that fiction has to be believable.”

The writer does not smile. She stops smiling. “Oh. Interesting. I disagree,” she says, then turns and walks away.

Her partner tells him not to take it personally, she’s touchy about that sort of thing. Then he leaves as well and Arthur is alone.

He does not think about them. He thinks about Han. Thinks and is terrified that she will cease to be magical and he will cease to be nice. That when this happens she’ll have all these impeccably curated, wonderfully supportive friends, and he’ll just have a promise to keep.

He finds a bench out back and sits and drinks his wine and stares into the bushes. The party sours for him so completely that after a few minutes he decides he has to leave. Has to, because if he doesn’t he might do something unrecoverable, say something that marks him as mean or small-minded.

"I'm going to head out," he says when he finds her. "I need some sleep. I promise it's just this one time, I'll stay out next time."

"That's okay. Can you find your way back? I think I'm going to stay a little while."

"Sure, no problem," he says, "I'll see you tomorrow."

Han looks perplexed as Arthur walks away.

"See you," she calls after him. He looks back and smiles and waves.

#

By the time Arthur reaches the stoplight below the apartment he's so tired that his eyes detach from reality and the cross-traffic seems momentarily like a strange unbounded river, gushing primary colors, liquid metal. He relaxes his hands and almost slides in front of a car. This wakes him up, palms suddenly slick and cold and clutching the brake levers.

He crosses the street and carries the bicycle up to the apartment. It's heavy but he doesn't trust it outside. It really is beautiful. He likes her sculptures but also doesn't understand them, so when her friends told him how talented she was he didn't quite get that either. But he got the bike.

In the apartment he sits down and breathes through his nose but cannot relax. At turns stiff with anxiety and scoffing at his internal drama, he knows what he's doing is counterproductive, self-destructive, but he can't quite manage to divert himself. Can't shake the feeling that some basic flaw has been revealed, that their relationship is already failing, that Han sees it as well. Maybe she's steeling herself

for it now, the inevitable end.

He considers what that end will mean for him. Thinks of how he will do it, if he has to. He's sure he will have to. He goes to the window and looks. The third story, not high enough. Maybe there's a door to the roof. He can check later.

He puts a hand to his throat and touches the veins, throbbing. It feels like the night before an exam he hasn't studied for, a test he knows he's going to fail. *We are not stupid people*, he thinks, *but desperate is pretty much the same thing*.

Still there's a small hope that luck will carry him through. He leans on this hope to steady himself, believing in it just enough to catch his breath. There's some Swiss Miss in the cabinet above the microwave and he makes a mug, sits in front of the TV and closes his eyes. Fingering the phone in his pocket, wondering if she's going to text. *Is it already over?* He opens his eyes and looks at the ceiling.

"You don't know. It's too early. You don't know yet."

For a while he doesn't move, just stares at the plaster.

There's a knock at the door.

Restorative Sleep

Michael was often sleepy at work. Sometimes after completing a file he'd nod off and the keyboards clacking around him became wind-up teeth chattering in a novelty shop, or woodpeckers trapped in glass cages, or tap-dancing elves at a burlesque. The dreams didn't last long. Knowledge that he was *not supposed to be sleeping* always knocked him awake after a few minutes, and the corresponding bump of adrenaline would keep him going for about an hour. After that he'd either drift off again or get coffee.

He'd never been caught, not by anyone who cared, but one day as he started to doze—frollicking with a herd of dik-diks across parquet floors—the fire alarm sounded. This noise provoked a hypnic jerk in Michael's left leg, which kicked the wall of his cubicle and tipped his chair backwards. He woke mid-fall, but did not comprehend what was happening until after the chair had hit the ground. He found himself lying on his back, head between two finely-haired calves, staring up the dress of his shift supervisor.

"Are you okay?" she asked, stepping back.

He blinked and shrugged from his place on the carpet.

Like most of the permanent employees, the supervisor was obese. Still she leaned over and offered a hand, which he thought was awfully chivalrous. Taking it, he almost pulled her down on top of him. He was heavy himself.

"Is this a drill?" he asked, rubbing the back of his head.

"Dunno. Either way we get fresh air."

They joined a stream of tired men and women heading for the exit, all dressed so forgettably that describing them would be a chore. These people were difficult even to look at, blending into the felt walls of the office like tedious chameleons, all slate and navy and faded pastels. No wonder they kept their eyes on the carpet.

It wasn't until they were outside, away from the unfriendly fluorescents, that they found the strength to look at one another, and talk. No one seemed to know what was happening, except that security said it wasn't a fire, it was something else, they weren't sure what.

Michael found he didn't particularly care. Neither did Teddy from IT.

"How's your girl?" Teddy asked, his voice and thin, pale face constricting the way they always did when he talked about women in a sexual way, which was the only way he ever talked about them.

Michael was not offended. He knew how hard that part of life was for Teddy. "She's the same," he said. "Antsy. Wants me to visit. I'm looking at flights for the fall. It's too hot in the summer."

“You gotta be careful. Pretty girl like that, what’s she want with you? No money, no prospects—she can find that in China, for sure. I bet she’s trolling for a green card.”

“She’s not that type. Xia just wants someone nice. Chinese guys are all spoiled, she says. Over there, if a girl gets married, her life’s over, and if she doesn’t get married her life’s over another way. Either way it’s over by thirty. Single women over twenty-five, even, they say they’re *past-sell*. That’s what she said. You know it’s the only country where women are more likely to kill themselves?”

“I did not know that, no. But it doesn’t seem to me like a strong inducement to start dating Chinese women. Or perhaps I’ve misunderstood something.”

Michael considered this. “She’s very pretty,” he replied, eventually. “And very nice to me, and I don’t know how to attract a woman like that in Spokane.”

Teddy rubbed his goatee and nodded, and was lost in thought.

There were sirens growing louder. Lots of sirens, from many directions. They watched two police cars and an ambulance drive by the office, lights flashing. A third police cruiser slowed and pulled into the parking lot. The car’s megaphone announced that they weren’t in danger, but there was a gas leak nearby and the area was being evacuated.

“Just be calm,” the voice pleaded. “You don’t need to rush, we don’t need an accident, don’t do anything stupid. Okay guys? And make sure to head towards Sprague, away from the highway.” With that, the lights flashed back on, and the cruiser drove off.

Michael went to his car and waited for the parking lot to clear. After a minute his phone buzzed. A group text from the team leader, announcing a mandatory team meeting at Round Table pizzeria.

#

Round Table was full of square tables brimming with fat khaki-clad men and women. Michael arrived too late for the garlic twists—Teddy was stuffing the last one into his mouth as Michael took a seat beside him—but just in time for the team leader's speech.

The team leader was a decommissioned lieutenant. He'd worked at the office for eight years, but was still defined by his service career. In his mid-forties, color slowly deserting his crew cut, he was one of the only team members who wasn't visibly unhealthy. On Fridays he wore t-shirts that advertised 5K's and half-marathons, and the look on his face, the default look, was that of a distance runner on a too-hot day.

"All right team, listen up," he said, tapping his glass with his spoon so hard it cracked. "We had a situation today. First off I want you to know that everyone, at least everyone from our office, made it out. Y'all did really well, I'm really proud. You rose to the occasion. Give yourselves a hand."

They did. Teddy whistled and slapped the table.

"Second, I want to explain what happened. Chlorine gas, apparently. The police wouldn't say where it came from, and they don't know why it's there, but I believe there is a possibility that this is an attack. Maybe. Don't get upset! It

probably wasn't, but it's better if you're prepared. The, um...enemy...had just started using chlorine bombs when I left the service, so they know how to make them. They're not dangerous unless you're in an enclosed space, though, and we got out fast. And the only gas they've detected so far was a couple blocks away. So we're all gonna be fine, don't worry. I emailed a friend of mine in intelligence, hopefully he'll get back to me soon and we'll know if we have something to worry about. In the meantime, enjoy your pizza!" He took a seat with the supervisors.

The team members were startled and silent for a moment.

Teddy leaned towards Michael. "What a choad," he whispered.

#

It had not been an attack. An industrial chlorine tank had ruptured at a nearby recycling plant. Michael's shift supervisor, looking at her phone, whispered something to the team leader as the pizzas came out, and he gave another speech, concluding with, "Sorry guys, hope I didn't frighten any of you. Got a little PTSD going, haha." Then he sat down and stared at his food.

Teddy snickered into his hand, but Michael didn't find it funny. He admired the team leader's gravitas, and later, driving home, cheerful from free food and a half-day of work, he thought about joining the navy. It might be nice, he thought. Out on the ocean, on the deck of an aircraft carrier, no land in sight. In the movies it's all work, guiding and securing planes, but they must get some free time. Maybe arrange basketball hoops and deckchairs in the evening, between the F-22's. Or do they not get personal time out at sea? That could be okay, too, he thought. A purposeful life.

Michael's greatest strength was his ability to convince himself that his life was on track, no matter how meager his opportunities for advancement, or his dating problems. He mistook this self-delusion for optimism, and it was his favorite thing about himself. This was sensible, since it made him likeable, and was the only thing keeping him from chronic depression. The problem was, lately he'd been finding his positive outlook more and more difficult to maintain—the emptiness of his day-to-day loomed large and hungry. He imagined a certain existential comfort in the prefab lifeplans offered by the military.

It might not allow much time for romance, true, but the other sailors would be just as lonely. There might be female crew too: cool competent servicewomen like Jodie Foster in *Silence of the Lambs* or Jessica Chastain in *Zero Dark Thirty* or Claire Danes in *Homeland*. Not that pretty, he knew, but smart and capable and ready to be charmed by a sensitive guy like him after years of bad treatment at the hands of macho military schmucks.

Probably not, he told himself. Try to be realistic. You know who your are. Don't get carried away.

When he got home he half-watched TV for a couple of hours, idly masturbating to phone porn. Then he took a nap.

#

A little after six he woke and was informed by his phone that he had missed a video call from Xia Hu.

That was bad. It brought him to a state of alertness. He got out of bed and

pissed and wet down his hair where it stuck out and even brushed his teeth. Then he sat at his desk and called her back on his laptop.

“Guòyìbùqù de,” he said as soon as she appeared on the screen. It was morning in Foshan, and one side of her face was marbled by semi-obstructed daylight.

She giggled at the too-formal apology. “That’s very good.”

“How are you?” He was glad she wasn’t upset.

“Not great,” she sighed through her nose. “It was very hard at work yesterday. My manager is angry. He said that the service people, like me, have not enough repeated customers.” Her accent in English was precise. Xia was proud of this, and it impressed Michael. What little Chinese he had was nearly unintelligible, even to his own ears, though he’d been studying diligently for three months. He’d never been good at impressions, or jokes, or anything involving the modulation of his voice. He spoke like someone who did not enjoy talking, and this discomfort carried easily into Mandarin.

“I’m sorry,” he said in English.

Xia didn’t giggle this time, she frowned. She did not appreciate it when he was apologetic. She had told him more than once, many times, that it was unmanly. Michael could see this thought running behind her eyes, he could see the irritation, the controlled anger, and he almost flinched, almost apologized a third time, though he didn’t think he had done anything wrong; he’d meant the sorry to be commiserating, not supplicating. But he knew that didn’t matter. He was always

doing something wrong with women, which made him hyper-vigilant in his behaviors around them. Not that this helped. Nothing helped. He'd even read a couple books Teddy had lent him about how to act, though of course they'd been useless—not to mention offensive. They explained a lot more about Teddy than they did about girls, Michael thought. Anyway, he knew enough to know confidence was important, so he tried to project that, holding a smile as Xia took a breath and said, “No biggie,” before explaining that it was just another day, really not so bad, how was his?

He told her about the evacuation. She laughed as he related the team leader's speech and immediate retraction, and this time he laughed too. She told him the team leader reminded her of the military men who had given speeches at her high school and college. He described the abstinence advocates who spoke at his school. They chatted about the differences and similarities between their lives, told stories that were funny to them, and generally enjoyed the conversation.

After an hour she had to leave for work, and he said he wished she could stay, and she reciprocated. In truth, more than an hour of conversation would've been a bit much for either of them, and they both knew it. As they were saying goodbyes she encouraged him to visit her, as she always did, and he told her he would buy a ticket soon, as soon as he could secure a couple weeks of vacation. She blew him a kiss and ended the call.

Michael felt better about himself. After quickly beating off, he walked to a Subway near his house and had a turkey sandwich with baked potato chips and a

diet soda. Talking with Xia made him want to be healthier. She was attractive, and during their video calls he couldn't help but compare his appearance with hers. The picture of himself, tense and overweight, hovering awkwardly above her shoulder in the upper right corner of the screen, made him feel unequal. It made him want to be better. She made him want to be better. That was a good thing, he was sure.

#

The next morning a few jokes were made about the evacuation, but they stopped after the team leader had them observe a moment of silence for the three recycling plant workers who had died of chlorine poisoning. He read their names out of the newspaper, and noted their ages and the ages of their children. "Let's hope they get a nice big fat settlement from the city," he concluded. Michael closed his eyes, which stung with pity.

At lunch Teddy talked about a girl he'd met on Tinder who possessed a large amount of sexual paraphernalia, laughing loudly as he described the collection. Michael joined in a little, but mostly thought about how strange people were, even the people he knew. He wondered about the fetishes of his co-workers, the secret lives. This made him feel better about Xia. It made him feel that their relationship was not so incomplete, that the cultural differences were not really so important. After all, the people from his own country were as alien as anyone. She was normal compared to many of the women Teddy told him about. She might be the most normal person he knew. He believed that.

When they finished their hoagies Teddy asked if he wanted to watch sports

after work, but Michael had a Chinese lesson.

“Lame,” Teddy sneered, but without malice.

Michael made a conciliatory gesture.

#

He’d begun studying Chinese soon after meeting Xia on a cross-national dating app that prevented residents of the same country from contacting one another. This made for a strange, desperate scene, which actually fit Michael fairly well. His first message to her had consisted of three short sentences complimenting her photo, and asking about movies she liked. It was the 24th message he sent that day.

Hi Mikaladida, she had messaged him back after only 30 minutes. Yes I like movies very much. I haven't seen Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon, though I hear it is beautiful. I like romantic comedies best. My favorites are Love Actually and Titanic. But I am very different from Rose, I am more like Jack, I think :) Is Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon your favorite movie, or were you only asking because I am Chinese? Also, is your name Mike? I like that name, it was the name of one of my English teachers. What do you do? Xia.

He’d been concerned by her enthusiasm, which struck him as predatory—an idea corroborated by Teddy—but after a week of trawling the site, she was one of only five women who responded to him in intelligible non-bot English. The other four had all stopped responding once he described his life to them.

Once he got to know Xia better, her way of speaking seemed less like a

performance and more an aspect of her character, one which he thought resembled his own awkwardness. Still, he knew she must be a different person entirely in her native tongue, since English was for her a language of commerce, of clients and potential clients. He worried sometimes that she saw him that way, as a customer, and this spurred him to study Chinese. He wanted to hear her real voice, he told himself.

The classes were held at the Asian Culture Center, a converted convenience store on the north side of town. When a group of first-generation parents had leased the building 30 years earlier, with plans to collectively educate their children in their heritage, the surrounding neighborhood had been popular with east and south Asian immigrants. Now its residents were virtually all poor whites, mostly native-born, many struggling with addiction problems. It was a bad place for these problems, but there weren't any better options.

Many of the neighborhood houses looked abandoned, however the curbs were crowded with old cars. In the evenings about half of them were occupied by sleeping people. When he first started the classes, Michael had stared through the windows of the cars at these people on his way to the center, feeling pity but also jealousy at their ability to sleep whenever they wanted. He did this until one day he recognized one of them from high school. It had occurred to him at that moment that he could become one of these people if he wanted. Imagining this, he found it difficult to pinpoint what exactly he would lose by quitting his job, abandoning his apartment, and joining the the auto-sleepers. This confused and troubled him, and

afterwards, when he walked to the center he kept his eyes fixed on the sidewalk and reviewed vocabulary in his head.

The Mandarin lessons had originally been just for kids, mostly Chinese-American, and though that had changed some years back, they were still the majority in the classroom. Michael sat in a corner with the adult learners. The others were all over fifty, and treated him as though he were a nephew.

The instructor was also friendly to Michael. On this day, like most days, she made brief small talk with the adult group, patted Michael's shoulder, and then walked to the front of the classroom and asked for homework. Both the children and adults quieted as they drew out papers from their bags and folders. As they began passing their worksheets to the front the classroom door opened.

"Hi," said a woman roughly Michael's age. "Is this the beginner class?"

"Yes," the instructor replied. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Yvonne. I just signed up a few days ago. Eileen said I should come today. Um, sorry I'm late, I had trouble finding the building..." her voice trailed off under the instructor's glare.

"Eileen is a *lǎn chóng*," she said, blowing air through her teeth. A few children laughed, and the instructor smiled at their side of the room. Then her smile became wider, as though she'd thought of something funny, and she turned back to Yvonne. "It's fine, it's not a problem. Do you have your books? Good. Unfortunately, I can't help prepare you for class. As you can see we've already started. But here, why don't you sit next to Michael? He can help with anything you need help with." She pointed

at the desk next to his, then stared at him until he felt himself blushing. It took less than a second.

Fortunately his coloring made this less visible. He introduced himself to Yvonne, who was blushing also.

They reviewed the homework assignment and then moved on to new material. Michael explained the workbook exercises to Yvonne. When they split into pairs to practice on simple conversations, he commented that her pronunciation was already better than his, on her first day. She seemed to find his humility endearing.

"I've been practicing with tapes," she said.

"Oh, I tried those, they didn't help me much. You've got talent."

"Yeah," she grimaced, "I've always had that. No follow through, though. That's more of a problem, I'm learning."

To Michael this seemed like an intimate revelation. He tried to look sympathetic. "Why'd you decide to study Mandarin?" he asked.

"I'm going to China in September, to teach. I want to be prepared."

"Nice. Also brave. I wish I could do something like that."

"Neither, really. I just want to get out of Spokane. What about you? Why study if you don't want to go?"

"Um, I'm dating a Chinese girl. In China. Online. I know that sounds weird..." He trailed off, trying to think of a better way to explain.

"A little," she said, with humor.

"Well sure. But Spokane, right? I mean, the dating pool isn't well stocked. And honestly, even if it were, I barely know how to fish."

"Wow. You leaned into that metaphor."

"Uh-huh. I regret that now."

"You should."

"I do."

"Get back to work," the instructor said from behind them, projecting indignation. She winked at Michael. He wished she wouldn't do things like that.

#

"What do you think of the new girl?" the instructor asked after class. Michael was always slowest to leave.

"She's nice," he said.

"And single. I can tell."

"I have a girlfriend, you know. Or is your memory going? I didn't think you were so old, but it's hard to tell with you people."

"And I didn't know you were so young. A girlfriend you've never even touched. Are you twelve?"

"We do other things. Things I'm not going to tell you about."

She made a sound like gagging. "I don't want you to tell me about them. Ecch. The way you talk about her, this Foshan girl, I see you like her, but mainland women are all crazy. Don't tell anyone I said this, but it's true. The men are bastards and the women are insane."

“You’re just prejudiced because you’re from Taiwan.”

“No, my ex-husband is from Suzhou. I’ve been there many times. I know what they’re like.”

“Maybe your ex-husband made you prejudiced.”

“Just date the American girl, *Bái chī*.”

“If I knew how to date American girls, I wouldn’t be in your stupid class.”

“*Bái chī*.”

#

Two classes later, Michael and Yvonne went out for a drink. Not in a romantic way, nothing like that, in fact it started with a conversation about Xia, who lived and worked in Foshan.

“It’s only like fifty miles from Shenzhen,” Yvonne told him, looking at her phone. The school where she would be teaching English was in Shenzhen. “What are the odds?”

“The Pearl River Delta the most populated region in the country,” he said. “In the world, actually. So probably pretty good.”

“Still though. I’ll have to visit, when you come to visit her, or you guys can come visit me! Or whatever. Oh, I should ask her what it’s like over there. Have you told her about me?”

Michael took the opportunity to look uncomfortable.

“What, you haven’t said anything about me? I thought you talked to her every day.”

He nodded ambiguously.

“What does that mean, Michael?”

“I have told her about you. She may have assumed that you were a man named Ivan. I may have failed to correct this assumption.”

Yvonne laughed. “You’re worried she’ll get jealous that you have a female friend?”

“Yes.” He sighed. “She can be kind of paranoid. Her last boyfriend cheated on her, so, I guess it makes sense.”

“That sucks. Well, she doesn’t have to worry about me. You’re not my type.”

Michael laughed at this. He was never anyone’s type. That was okay, but it made him want a drink. Yvonne came with, inviting herself, probably because she thought he was harmless, because he had a girlfriend. Because he semi-consciously avoided any behavior that could be interpreted as even mildly seductive. He could feel his brain discarding lines as too flirtatious, lines like *don’t be so sure*, or *everyone is everyone’s type after a few mojitos*. It wasn’t even that he was in a relationship, if he were single he wouldn’t have been able to say them. A weakness, he knew, but it made life so much easier, saved him so much embarrassment.

They drank for an hour and talked pleasantly, without any physical contact, not even brushing elbows. Then she left, and Michael had another drink.

The third beer made it hard for him to sleep when he got home, no matter how much he masturbated. At 3 a.m., when he was finally too tired to resist the urge, he texted Xia *are you busy?*

She didn't like him to call when he couldn't sleep. "You look so scary late at night," she had told him, more than once. "It makes me worry." But he thought it would make him feel better, and besides he hadn't done it in a long time.

Yes, I'm busy she texted back, five minutes later. *I have to take my useless brother to an interview :(Go to sleep, big boy. We will talk tomorrow! :)*

#

Days after insomnia were bad days. Keyboard noises became plastic-shoed crowds marching in parade, or taloned mice skittering through the walls. Meanwhile the dream-narratives themselves developed lines of dramatic tension, irrational mysteries that never resolved and dragged him closer to REM sleep.

This time, while maintenance rewired the ceiling, Michael's cubicle transformed into a windowless steel room, and the whirring of electric drills became a whoosh of gas escaping a large canister of chlorine in the middle of the floor. The room's only door wouldn't open, and he couldn't find a key or crowbar or battering ram. Feeling woozy, he approached the canister—though it scared him—and tried to plug the pin-sized hole with his thumb. It didn't help, the whooshing continued and he saw the yellow gas leaking around his thumb, could feel it poisoning him. His breathing became rapid, and he looked around for another solution. One of the wall panels looked different: perhaps a hidden door? He tried to go to it, but couldn't move. His breath came in gasps and there was a pressure on his chest, on his left shoulder. His arm was numb. Heart failure for sure. The chlorine was stopping his heart.

“Michael.” The team leader’s hand was on his shoulder, shaking him gently.

“Can you come to my office for a second?”

His pulse slowed as the team leader walked away, then climbed again. He got out of his chair and followed, shaking his head slightly to wake himself.

“Close the door,” the team leader said after they were inside. “Sit down. Listen, bud. You’ve been sleeping a lot lately, I’ve noticed. Don’t worry, I’m not firing you. Lots of people nap, it’s a boring job. You’ve just been doing it a little too much. Are you feeling okay?”

“I’ve been having some insomnia. Girl trouble, you know.”

“I hear that. It never gets any easier, no matter how old you get. Wish I could tell you different. You should get some exercise, it’ll regulate your sleep cycle, and maybe help with the girl trouble too. But that’s not what I want to talk about.”

Michael tried to think of what else this man might want from him. He stared expectantly.

The team leader set his features in a serious way before he continued.

“You’re not in trouble or anything,” he said, “not really, not yet. I mean, I like you. Hell, everybody likes you, you’re a likeable guy, good for morale. But I’ve got your numbers here, and they’re bad. Not the worst, but when things get tight you’re going to be let go. I mean, this isn’t a growth industry, right? When the economy’s up, we stay the same size, and when it’s down we shrink. That’s just how it is. Next time there’s a slowdown it’s gonna be your ass, unless you start working harder. So the reason I asked you in here is, I wanted to know if you want to work harder. Because

honestly, you might be better off just going and doing something else. I mean, even if you up your numbers by a third, you're still not getting promoted anytime soon. It might make sense to move on."

"Move on? Like joining the Navy?"

"Ha, no. Like getting your CPA cert. Or going back to school. You don't want to join the forces, believe me. You're not cut out for it. I'm telling you that as a friend."

"Okay. Thank you." Despite a feeling of disorientation, it was nice to know the team leader thought of him as a friend.

"Anyway, think about what I said. I just want what's best for you. And take better care of yourself."

"I will, sir."

"All right. Thanks Michael, you can go."

#

When he talked to Xia after work, he told her that he wanted to move to China.

"Not permanently. I mean just for a year or two. Long enough to really learn Mandarin."

"Right. All right. What made you think of this? Where did the idea come from? I thought you just wanted to visit."

"Well, I was talking with the team leader, and he said—"

"The man who thought Spokane was being attacked by muslims?"

"Uh-huh. He said he thought I might be happier doing something else. And I

thought about it and I think he's right."

"What? Did he fire you? I didn't think you had problems at work."

"No, he was just being friendly."

"That doesn't sound friendly, Michael. What would you do here, anyway? You can't find a data job here."

"I'd teach, like all the other foreigners."

"But you've never taught. Besides the schools prefer women and white people. You're too dark. It would be harder for you."

"I looked online and there were hundreds of English teaching jobs, no experience required. I'm sure I can find something"

"I still think it's a bad idea."

"I don't understand why you think this is such a bad idea. What are you afraid of?"

"I just worry it will be hard for you," she gave him a look as she said this that conveyed something he did not like.

"Why does everyone think I'm so weak?" His voice was soft, but had an edge.

Xia froze, as though she had been caught in something. Or perhaps she just wanted to be careful with her words. "I don't mean it that way," she said after a moment. "I mean the air is bad, so bad, and the people are not nice, and they will stare. People will talk about you in front of you, and the more language you learn, the more you'll hear them making fun of you. It's difficult here even if you fit, Michael." She made a placating gesture, "I have an idea. Why don't you come visit

me, for two weeks or three, and see what it's like. Then you decide if you want to teach. Wouldn't that be more sensible?"

"I just want to be with you," he said. But saying it, he wasn't sure this was true, either. He was just tired of being treated like a child. Tired of everyone knowing what was wrong with him except him.

"I want to be with you too," Xia said. "Come visit."

#

That night, after class, he went to a bar with Yvonne. They got drunk and she came back to his apartment and had sex with him.

It wasn't a planned thing. They had been talking normally, platonically, Michael's attention shifting between her and the ballgame on TV, Yvonne idly checking her phone, texting friends during the breaks in their conversation. In fact, the conversation had felt done, and Michael had been about to close his tab, when he saw Teddy come in with a girl, laughing in a way that made it look like he had just made a joke at her expense, or anyway she was blushing and he was not. Michael waved and Teddy looked his way and smiled and approached their table.

"Hey dude, how's it going? This is Yvonne. Yvonne, this is Teddy."

"Oh," she said, looking up from her phone. Her features stiffened when she saw Teddy's face. "Hi Ted." Her lips closed tightly and she looked at the girl next to him, then fixed her eyes on the table.

"Hi Yvonne," Teddy said, blandly, before turning to Michael. "This is Avery," he winked, "I told you about her the other day, remember? Avery, this is Michael, we

work together.”

“Hi Michael.”

“Hi Avery.”

“We’re gonna go get some drinks. I’ll see you tomorrow, Mike.”

“Have a good night.” Michael said, as the couple walked away from the booth.

“Are you okay?” he asked Yvonne, who was still staring at the table. “Do you know Teddy?”

“Why are you friends with him?” she asked, still not looking up.

“We just work together.” Michael lied, reacting to her discomfort. “I don’t even really know him that well. He kind of creeps me out.”

Yvonne looked at him then, and he fixed a look of vague concern on his face. Eventually she said. “I went out with him a few times. Tinder. He was a real asshole. Even for Spokane. Why are there so many in this town? Or is it me?”

“It’s the town,” he said emphatically. “Small pool, remember? And not just small—tainted. It’s not you.”

“I need another drink.”

“On me. What do you want?”

Two long islands later she moved to his side of the booth to show him a funny video on her phone. He laughed and she laughed and leaned against him, he could feel her breast on his elbow, and for a second his eyes went wide as a frightened animal’s. Then he relaxed. She continued to play videos. After a couple minutes he tentatively rested his arm on the bench behind her, and felt a surge of

excitement when she leaned an inch closer to his chest.

A little later Teddy caught his eye from across the room, and smiled and raised his glass, which made Michael uncomfortable. He smiled back, though, and nodded.

Yvonne, so far as he could tell, did not look in Teddy's direction the whole night.

#

The sex was almost unreal to him. It felt so nice. He hadn't had intercourse in almost two years; the closest he'd gotten were the weekly sessions of mutual masturbation with Xia, and while it was nice being told how large his penis was by a diminutive Asian woman, you could only hear these words so many times before they began to feel performed.

While Yvonne's face was inexpressive during the act of sex, and the brief foreplay leading to it, Michael thought he could sense arousal in the urgency of her hands and hips, the way she pulled him onto and into her. Her rough unvoiced breathing sounded so much more authentic than Xia's trans-Pacific moans, and he found her sexual response more believable simply because it was muted.

When Michael came they separated, and he fell instantly asleep.

In the morning he was confused, not by Yvonne's early, silent departure—he was sure she had to get ready for work—but by his own feelings. The thought of moving to China for a girl he'd never touched suddenly seemed pointless, and while he still had feelings for Xia, he recognized how misguided those feelings were. How

childish he had been. She lived 10,000 miles away, and clearly just wanted security, same as him. That wasn't love. What they shared was a sense of isolation from their respective cultures. Which was sad, and he felt deep sympathy for her and for himself, but it wasn't a reason to get married. That was insane.

He had the satisfying thought that all the problems in his life stemmed from the lack of a nice girl, and now that he had one, well, everything would be all right. He got up to pee, but before leaving the room he turned back and leaned over her pillow, hoping for a whiff of shampoo, or perfume, or dried sweat.

Paper Donkeys

It wasn't hot. It was perfectly pleasant, but I couldn't sleep. The end of August meant the end of air conditioning, which meant the wheeze of Joshua's breathing machine came cleanly through the vents, from his room to mine. I had a window open and was wishing for some kind of ambient noise, but it was 2 a.m. on a Wednesday night, or I guess Thursday morning, and there was no traffic.

Joshua's sleep apnea was a product of a cervical fracture that had partially severed his spinal cord. Sometimes the signals from his brain shorted out on the way to his lungs. They'd get lost in the mess of scar tissue at his C4. Surfing, four years earlier, a set of waves had mashed him headfirst into a sandbank. Friends pulled him to shore.

I didn't know Joshua well back then. He was a year ahead of me at college. After the injury he withdrew from school and spent ten months rehabilitating. When he returned we were in the same classes.

People didn't talk about it much when he came back, because they'd already been talking about it for months. Everyone had second- or third-hand accounts of both the accident and Joshua's recovery. So when he showed up to classes in a wheelchair, thin as a cancer patient, we weren't surprised, or were well enough prepared that we knew not to show our surprise.

And what energy he had! He rolled around campus with an enthusiasm that belied his appearance: the irregular facial hair—he was still having trouble shaving, then—and pitted eyes. He was admired for his resilience, his optimism. He came out to bars, and laughed, and got moderately drunk, and talked about relearning fine motor skills, retaking his driver's test in a minivan adapted for people who couldn't use standard pedals. He was like *Chicken Soup for the Soul* made flesh. Ready to laugh at anything, hang with anyone. That image persisted throughout his college career, and I think it's still held by people who've never lived with him.

But I was living with him, and his breathing machine was keeping me up. I

might've put on music but I was too angry, too sleepy. Eventually I drifted off thinking evil thoughts, not about Joshua but about the world in general. I dreamed I was experiencing an apocalypse, fleeing or eviscerating awful, vaguely familiar people.

In the morning it was okay, there were no clouds and I had cleaned recently so everything looked nice. I made an omelet, thought about making one for Josh, only there was no telling when he'd be getting up. As I was eating, there was movement in his room, the gurgle of his morning bong rip. I finished my food and left the plate and skillet unwashed in the sink. He came out as I was getting my bag.

"You made eggs," he half-asked, as I made for the front door.

"Yeah," I said, looking in his general direction but not stopping. "Sorry, I didn't know you were up, otherwise I'd have made more." I closed the door behind me.

My job was repetitious. Data receipt and arrangement, in a wide blue room full of dozens of other people doing the same thing. I did not like to talk about it, or think about it, or even complain about it. I did not have friends there, or enemies, just people I talked to about nothing, not in a funny way; in a way that made the day pass quicker. The salary was enough to pay down my student loans, and that was all that mattered. When I left each afternoon I forgot it almost as quickly as dreams. It was a thing I had to do, and it was okay, very much like sleep.

When I first moved in with Joshua, the August after graduation, I would usually come home after work, put on sweatpants or shorts, and drink soda and

watch TV. Joshua would come out of his room and we would talk and maybe smoke a little. Or I would smoke a little. Joshua never stopped smoking, so the little we smoked together was just part of the enormous quantity of weed he inhaled over the course of the day. Once he tried to quit—after a week sober he looked like he'd broken his neck all over again. Lifeless, I mean.

Not that I minded the smoking, I don't want to give the impression that I judge people based on how they choose to live their lives. Though I guess that's really the only way you can judge people. Anyway, you know what I'm trying to say.

I didn't mind the drugs, it wasn't that. But I didn't go straight home anymore. I went to Mutta's and watched sports and chatted some with the bartender, June, who was friendly to me even though I drank responsibly and tipped conservatively.

"How's your day?" she asked most days, including the Thursday I was kept awake by Joshua's breathing machine.

"Same. It's always the same, but today it was especially the same."

"Sounds fun," she said, turning away to clean behind the bar. "It's always nice to talk to people who love what they do. Gives me a warm, fuzzy feeling inside. Like fucking a teddy bear. Well, at least you can relax now."

"Yeah, until I have to go home and deal with..." I sighed and gestured dismissively, "...all that shit."

"What, more trouble in paradise?"

"Nothing new, just the same shit over and over again. It's exhausting."

"Well, it's your own dumb fault for living with that idiot. Why'd you re-up on

the lease?”

I shrugged. “No good reason. I feel like I’m constantly slipping in and out of sleep, like a weekend morning when you don’t need to get out of bed, but keep waking up, like there’s some urgent appointment you’ve missed. I have these brief moments of alertness, where I search my memory for a reason to be alert. But there is no reason, so after a little while I drift off again. It’s not good sleep, though.”

“You should try cocaine!”

“You think?”

“Sure. At least you’ll know why you’re awake.”

“Do you know where I could get some?”

She laughed. “Anywhere,” she said. “It’s everywhere!”

I was about to ask her if she wanted to do some too, but I hesitated and she walked away chuckling. I didn’t have the courage to bring it up again. I looked up Josh’s dealer’s number in my phone.

#

When I got home Joshua was on the couch with Vera, his girlfriend of two months. They were playing *Smash Brothers* on his Wii. He said it was therapy to improve his coordination. And it was that. But it was the other thing too: a grown man behaving like a child. In the same way his prescription marijuana is for chronic pain, but also for a pothead.

Vera, meanwhile, was prettier than you might expect. Skinny, upbeat, hyper-moral goth. In bars when he’s single Joshua will talk about how he can pick up

any girl in the room just by playing the courageous cripple card. It's not true, but he does well for himself. He also has a type: fringe chicks with impaired self-esteem and unimpeachable ethics. The sort of women who get turned on by the sense of their own rectitude.

Vera was a specific person, yes, but she was also so clearly of this type that it was hard for me to recognize any individuating characteristics. Pink and blue hair and a nose ring and glasses with badly chewed temple tips and chewed fingernails painted dark; she looked different, but felt the same as half a dozen other girls I'd met since moving in with Josh.

Standing by the couch, watching them play their game, we didn't acknowledge each other. I wondered if they were high, or if I was a little drunk, or maybe they just hadn't noticed me, or were deliberately ignoring me. Worried is probably the wrong word; I was considering possibilities when Josh turned to me and started.

"Where did you come from?" he asked.

"Work. Mutta's."

"How's June doing?"

"If I could tell I would tell you first. She said she was fine."

"Did she mention me?"

"Not in any way."

"Who's June?" Vera asked.

"A bartender," I said, just as Joshua said, "An ex."

I looked away. June had slept over twice, with Josh, and afterwards showed no interest in getting anywhere near our apartment again.

“Oh,” said Vera, turning back to the game. I went to my room.

I came back out a couple hours later, refreshed by, among other things, a nap. The sun was gone and Vera was sitting alone at the kitchen table with a book. I was not particularly interested in what book it was but she heard my footsteps and looked up at me and kept looking as I approached the refrigerator.

“What are you reading?” I asked, feeling I had to say something.

“Against Interpretation.”

I blinked hard. “Do you like it?”

“It’s interesting.”

“Yeah?” I took a frozen dinner from the freezer and started to unpackage it.

“I like the idea that the real value of art can’t be reduced to discrete variables, that it can only be measured by the reaction it creates in its audience. And I like how Sontag totally dismisses content/style dualism.”

I poked holes in the plastic film with a fork. “You reading it for a class?”

“No.” *Of course not.* “I just like to read.”

“Cool.” I set the microwave timer and pressed start. “Where’s Josh?”

“Sleeping, I think,” she said. “Long day, you know.”

“I don’t. Something happen?”

“He didn’t tell you?” She looked at me. “Josh hit his Kickstarter goal.”

“Oh shit. That’s awesome.”

It was awesome. It meant I'd have the apartment to myself for two weeks. Josh had been raising money to attend an origami workshop in Kyoto. Folding was a big part of what he did, something he'd been doing since the accident, another part of his rehab, and a focus of the lifestyle blog that he claimed was his primary source of income—I'd lived with him long enough to know that most of what he got came from the government and his parents. He was not especially talented at folding, I don't think, but he was good for someone with diminished motor control.

Recently he'd started giving motivational presentations at local high schools, talking about origami and video games and disability. They always ended with him taking a pair of forearm crutches from some hiding place and hobbling to the podium, applause break, "*Nothing* is impossible," applause break, hobble away, leaving the empty wheelchair center stage as the lights cut or curtain drops. I had seen it more than once. I'd seen all his shtick more than once.

"I wish I could go to Japan," said Vera.

"Really?" *Of course you do.*

"It's just such a cool culture. They have so much history."

"True."

Her eyes went back to her book. I looked out the window and watched the movement of shadows on a large lavender curtain across the street. The shadows did not look like people, but they were moving.

Vera kept reading until I sat down at the table with my lasagna. She watched me take a few bites, then began chewing on the thumbnail of her right hand. I

continued to eat as she moved to her index and then middle finger. Her nails were all glossy and blackish-purple. When she got to her ring finger I put down my fork.

“Do you ever worry about swallowing the nail polish?” I asked.

“It’s organic,” she said, taking her hand from her mouth and looking at it.

“Huh. What’s it made from?”

“No idea. Tastes like anise. It’s called gloaming.”

I just looked at her, then slowly took another bite of lasagna. She tapped her fingers on the table and watched me.

“You want something to eat?” I asked.

“No.”

“We have pizza rolls and pop tarts.”

“Really, I’m not hungry.”

“A drink, then? Rainier? Kahlua and orange juice?” I wanted her to stop tapping and chewing her fingers.

“I’m all right,” she said, and got up and went to the couch.

Could she have had an eating disorder? I don’t know. The possibility occurred to me, but I didn’t want to pry. I remembered, or thought I remembered, her describing herself as ‘naturally thin’ at one point. Maybe that was all it was. I’ve always had trouble reading too much into things, especially with women. When I catch myself doing it I try to stop. Maybe she just wasn’t hungry, maybe the nail thing was something else.

After finishing the lasagna, tossing the container and putting my fork in the

dishwasher, I sat down in the armchair perpendicular to the couch where Vera was reading or pretending to read her book. The chair faced the window but there were no longer any shadows or anything moving across the street. I picked up the remote and pointed it at the TV as though I wanted to watch something.

“So,” I said, blinking from the blank TV to the dark window, definitely not looking at Vera, but waiting until she turned her head away from her book to continue, “I’ve got some coke. It’s not really my thing, but a friend gave it to me. Do you have any interest?”

“Oh. Uhhmm...” Her eyes widened and fixed on me, but the rest of her face was blank, tense in a way I couldn’t read. Either offended or excited.

“Yeah, it’s not really my thing,” I repeated. “I’m not sure what to do with it.”

“I think you’re supposed to snort it,” she said. “I’ll pass, though. It’s the wrong kind of night for it.”

“You’re probably right. It’s just burning a hole in my pocket is all. I’ll wait for a better night.”

#

I slept okay. In the morning I made banana pancakes, enough for three, but Joshua and Vera weren’t up by the time I left, so I covered their share in saran wrap and tagged it with a sticky note saying *Eat Me!*.

Work was the same, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. It took a part of me, but it wasn’t a part I was using. Afterwards I met college friends for drinks, like most Fridays, and they asked about Josh, who hadn’t come out in a month, and I told them

he was fine, had a new girlfriend, yes, the same kind as always. Someone commented on how he had been shit with girls until he broke his neck, which I followed up with the speculation that maybe living through that sort of thing, living with that sort of thing, would give a person unnatural confidence. It was a theory I'd had for some time.

"No," said Carl, who'd gone to high school with him. "He was always like that, even before. It's all the smoke, I'm pretty sure. But back then he just came off as a jackass. Now with the chair," he gestured at his own legs, "bitches think he's plucky."

Carl, who had also roomed with Joshua back in college, was already a little drunk.

#

I got home before one. We'd visited other bars, to search out familiar faces or just to drink more. Some of the guys were alcoholics and some were lonely and I was somewhere in between, but it didn't feel like a good night for me. It was one of those nights where the frailties of my friends felt infectious. So I left. I had to work the next day.

When I got back to the apartment the first thing I saw was the plate of pancakes and the sticky note untouched on the counter. I picked up the topmost pancake, curled it into a cylinder, and took a bite. The rest went in the trash, along with the note and the plastic. As I threw them away I noticed my plastic lasagna tray was still at the top of the trash. I looked around, saw that the sink had no dishes in it, that the coffee and dining room tables were free of ash and paraphernalia. I

wondered where Joshua had been all day. I wondered if he was at Vera's place.

This question was answered a minute later, after I collapsed onto the couch, exclaiming, "Ahh, fuck me man. Fuck me." I heard from his room the creak and slide of him moving from his bed to his chair. "Sorry, didn't mean to wake you, didn't know you were here," I said when he came out.

"No worries," he said, pushing himself into the living room. His eyes were red, even more than usual. "I wanted to talk anyway."

I took a full breath. "Sure. Hey, is Vera here?"

"No she's not. Why?"

"I was—"

"You wanted her to get high with you?"

"No—"

"You know she's in recovery?"

"She's in recovery? And she's dating *you*?"

"I *met* her in recovery."

"You still go?"

"Of course I still go. I have chronic pain and I live in Spokane. Do you know how easy it is to get Oxy here? People come to this city to backslide."

"All right, I know. You never said you were still going to that shit."

"You expect me to talk about it with you? Why were you trying to give Vera cocaine?"

"I didn't want to try it alone, and I knew you wouldn't be up for it." That last

part, at least, was true. Josh hardly ever drank coffee; stimulants got him nervous, worrying about his neck, fingering it and shivering. That's what he'd been like during finals week our senior year, wired on Adderall.

"So you weren't trying to fuck her," he said.

"Jesus. I was just bored. I don't find her especially attractive," I lied, trying to hurt him. "She was just there."

"You don't find her attractive," he repeated. "She was just there." Like he was acting in a movie, interrogating me. Like I had done something wrong. Like I hadn't spent the last year and a half cleaning up his shit, fronting him rent, smiling at his self-promotion. I was angry too.

"What's the problem, Josh? I'm tired."

"The problem is Vera says she can't come back here. She says it's because of you. Because it isn't clear what's going on between you and me. She said she doesn't like the energy."

"Of course," I said. "The fucking energy."

"God damn it, why do you always have to be such a prick?"

"It's not my fault your girls all run away," I said. I could feel the skin on my nose and cheekbones twitching. "That's not on me."

#

The ceiling in my room spun whenever I opened my eyes, but I couldn't sleep. Resentment kept my thoughts moving. I tried to talk myself into despising Joshua, but it's hard for me to be unfair. I don't mean I'm a good person, just rational. I

ended up going through the pros and cons of his life, his character. The real hardships versus the mythology, bravado versus pathos, mock-heroism versus heroism. It was not clear cut, all the categories overlapped. I thought about the canned lines he used with women, the noises they made in his room, the exaggerated contentment the morning after, girls touching his shoulder and Joshua smiling too much, the Cialis prescription he kept hidden in his desk. I thought about his lifestyle website, his thousands of followers on Twitter and Instagram, and about his reliance on the government and his parents; his inability to get a real job.

In the end my list came out even, which was very unsatisfying, and probably says more about me than Josh.

#

The next day had a feverish quality. I left the apartment without showering and got drive-thru coffee and an egg-bagel sandwich. For once, I was glad to be working Saturday.

At the office I had trouble remembering what I was doing, and what I had been doing ten minutes earlier. I'd been sleeping poorly, but that was only a part of the reason. I kept imagining confrontations with Joshua, back-and-forths where I would make him see himself clearly, upend his self-deceptions. I would make him understand that the narrative he'd constructed for himself was deeply puerile. In my head I explained, again and again, in different ways, that the reason he couldn't keep friends or romantic partners was that they all saw through the fantasy, and he never did. That's why no one can stand you, I would tell him, that's why your dealer is the

only one person who ever hangs with you. You define yourself by your injury, and so you can't overcome it.

"Are you finished with the rushes yet?" my boss asked, interrupting my subvocalized assault. "Your queue is static."

"No, on it," I said, and for the next half-hour I focused on work. I wasn't too worried. Usually I was good at my job.

#

At 5:30 I went to Mutta's. By that point I was done thinking about Joshua, ready to think of anything else. I drank, watched basketball, talked with June, talked with acquaintances. None of it had any independent meaning to me: I didn't care about the outcome of the game, or whether I became drunk, or what the barflies said, or whether they were friendly or rude to me. That wasn't the point. Everything was just part of a pattern to evoke relaxation.

Most of my life, I think, is ritual. Prescribed sets of action whose direct outcomes are unimportant, but which stimulate my brain in a way that provides a sense of comfort or control or regularity. Not optimism, just a sense or belief that things will not get worse. A willingness to ignore hardship. A coping mechanism, I mean. Wholly irrational, but useful for someone like me, someone whose entire family is constantly sinking into or rising out of clinical depression, like swamp monsters. Without it, things like this debacle with Joshua might throw me into the loops and spirals that periodically capsize my parents and older sister. Instead I go to bars and try to feel social. I go to work and try to feel responsible. I go home and

try to feel comfortable.

“Going hard tonight,” June said, probably sarcastically, as she delivered my third drink to the booth where I was sitting. “Trouble with the missus?” She meant Joshua.

“I guess.”

“Shock. He come up short on the rent again?”

“No. Not yet, anyway. This time it’s my fault, I guess. I tried to get his girl to do coke with me.”

“Hahaha, no shit? That skinny bitch with the hair of a different color? What happened, she OD?”

“She declined. Apparently she’s doing recovery.”

“Hahahaha. She’s in recovery and she’s dating Josh?”

“She was dating him. I don’t know if she still is.”

“Hahahahaha.”

“She said there was too much negative energy in our apartment.”

“Yeah, well, guess she’s not entirely stupid.”

I looked at June, unsure, feeling somehow implicated by this comment.

“Anyway,” I said, “I’ve still got the coke. Can I talk you into it?”

Her smile receded. “I don’t think that would be a good idea,” she said, patting my shoulder, “Thanks for asking, though.”

#

Eventually I made my way home. I didn’t want to, I wanted to spend time

with June. I wanted to give her something she enjoyed, something that made her want to be around me.

After she patted my shoulder and walked away, I sat and considered avenues of persuasion. It took a few minutes to settle on one—I decided that next time she came by the table I would talk about my fear of going home, my desire to avoid Joshua, to avoid confrontation; how awful it is to argue with a tragic figure like that, how demeaning to both parties. *I just want to forget him for a night*, I would say, to elicit sympathy.

Sympathy wasn't what I wanted, but it could be enough to get her to do a line, and that would bind us in a way. At least for a night, at least until it wore off. Drugs are one of those midpoints you sometimes have to take girls to in order to get to the final destination—sometimes they like to pretend they don't know where things are going. I thought if I could get June to that midpoint I would be able to get to the end—that is, to her bed—and maybe avoid seeing Joshua all weekend.

I don't know how long it took me to see, maybe ten minutes, maybe thirty, but at some point and all at once it became clear to me that June was deliberately not looking in my direction, and that she was avoiding my part of the bar. I understood that she knew what I was going to ask, what I was going to try, and she wanted not to deal with it.

This made me feel see-through. I was stunned for a moment by what I can only describe, unfortunately, as vertigo of the heart, a sudden inversion of self-perception that brought me to the edge of tears. I dropped a twenty on the table—an eight

dollar tip—and left without finishing my beer.

Outside the air was friendly, and I half-sat, half-leaned against a cement table on the patio, trying to get my bearings. I wanted something to do, somewhere to go. It wasn't even late yet, there was still light in the sky, and I didn't want to go home. But after a few minutes I went home.

#

The apartment was dark and silent. I didn't announce myself, but also didn't try to sneak. I went to my room and shed my clothes, smelling myself as I did so—frowning at the odor, wondering if it had put June off, flushing with shame. I understood that that hadn't been a deciding factor in her rejection, it was something internal that repelled her. In fact I recognized what it was that she found distasteful. Some locus of negativity within me, a familial bitterness. I might try to disguise it, to countervail the cynicism with self-mockery, but this tactic was never more than marginally successful. Showering, I wished I could scrub the dimness from my behavior and from my experience of the world.

When I was dry I put a frozen dinner in the microwave. The tray began to spin and I felt sorry for myself. I turned away and looked out the window at the large lavender curtain across the street. The oddly formed shadows were moving again, and I tried to distract myself by imagining what they might belong to...balloons...bubbles...ghosts...my imagination failed as I remembered what I'd said to Vera, poor skinny technicolor Vera. Recalling how I'd acted with her, it felt right that I was alone. This sense of rightness was calming.

When the microwave dinged I peeled the plastic wrap from the top of the tray and carried it gingerly to the living room, intending to sit on the couch and eat over the coffee table—only the coffee table was covered with animals. Neat rows of colorful, hand-sized paper donkeys. I didn't see them till I turned on the lamp, and then I stopped, set the dinner down on a bookshelf, and looked more closely. My calmness eroded.

The donkeys were Joshua's signature fold—in his presentations he described them as 'a quixotic variant of the wish-granting *orizuru*, or paper crane'—and each one took him about twelve minutes to fold. Six rows of five donkeys meant six hours of folding, then. That was worrisome. That wasn't like him. It was the sort of thing my mother used to do when she wasn't feeling well.

I had assumed that Joshua was out with friends, or trying to make up with Vera, or trying to replace Vera. The donkeys made me think he was still in the apartment. I went to his door and knocked.

"Josh," I said. "You in there?"

There was no response. I tried the handle, but the door was locked. I shivered, and wondered if I could break it down.

"Josh!" I half-yelled, banging hard enough that the edge of the door cracked against the frame. "Josh!"

"What the fuck?" Joshua yelled back, clearly unhappy with being disturbed.

"Sorry, I wasn't sure you were here. Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not fucking okay; I'm trying to sleep off three edibles and you're

breaking my fucking door down.”

“Shit. Shit, my bad. I saw the donkeys and got worried.”

“Christ, what the hell. Fucking psycho, dude.”

“Sorry, sorry, have a good night.” I went back to the living room, brushed the paper donkeys into a pile, and moved my dinner to the coffee table.

Before I was halfway done I heard movement in his room. The creak of his chair, the gurgling bong. I thought about wolfing down the rest of the ravioli and scurrying to my room, but couldn’t see the point.

“I’m really sorry man,” I said when his door opened, “I didn’t mean to wake you, I just got worried.”

“It’s okay,” he said, rolling into the hallway. His voice was oddly coarse, and I turned to look at him. He looked half-dead, eyes shadowed, hunched in his chair. Worse than I’d seen him in a long time.

“You sure you’re all right?”

“Yeah, just too much weed.” He mumbled, looking at the floor. “Stupid stupid. No opioids, though, Not that stupid.”

“That’s good, Josh. Good on ya.” Saying this, I found all the pity I’d felt for myself and for Vera flow into the pathetic figure sagging in the hallway. *Even more broken than me*, I thought. Deep breath. “Listen,” I said, “I’m really sorry about what happened with Vera, that was my fault. I fucked up. I just feel mean sometimes. I can’t help it.”

“Hey,” he said, looking up for the first time, “I know. It’s okay. I know you

have trouble, and I know you want to be better.” He was perking up, I could hear motivational notes in his voice. “And I have problems too, big ones, I know. I’m grateful to you for putting up with it. But that’s why we’re good together! *Because* we have problems. We’re both such assholes we can sympathize with each other’s shittiness. And we can forgive each other, and we can help each other get better.” He smiled then, and would’ve seemed almost healthy if his eyes hadn’t been so red. “Anyway, dude, I know this is a cliché, but I have no idea where my phone is, and I’m starving. Is there any chance you could order a pizza? You can use my card if you can find it.”

“Sure!” I said, happily “No problem. And don’t worry dude, I got it.” I took out my phone. “You want cheesy garlic bites?”

“Yes,” he said, “I want those so much.”

I called and ordered. “Guy says it’ll be forty-five minutes,” I said, putting my phone away.

“Seriously? I don’t know if I can wait that long.”

“Want some chips?”

“What kind?”

“Fritos or cool ranch.”

“Both,” he said, and I handed him the bags. “Thanks.”

I went to the couch and collapsed and closed my eyes. *Do you really think things will get better for us?* I wanted to ask, only I wanted to ask someone who knew how to look at the future honestly, not Josh. I put a hand in my pocket and felt

the small bag of cocaine. I wanted to do it, only not alone, and obviously not with him, but somehow I couldn't think of anyone else. I took my hand out of my pocket.

"This feels better," he said, pushing himself into the living room and sucking down another handful of chips. "These things are perfection." Wet crumbs sprayed onto his knees and the carpet around him.

I was struck by the memory of my sister saying the same thing, that exact phrase, years and years ago at a donut shop in New York City. "These things are perfection," she'd said, as we ate donut holes and watched a baker drop another batch of dough into sizzling oil. We were on vacation with our parents, and all four of us seemed very happy, or that's how I remember it.

I smiled and opened my mouth, about to tell Joshua about my sister, but something stopped me. A strong feeling that if I told him about my sister at the donut shop, he would say *we're family now*, or something like that. I stayed silent, and stared at the ceiling. It occurred to me that Joshua's voice was in my head, that I knew or thought I knew almost everything he would say before he said it, and that I didn't want to hear any of it. This didn't make me angry. It made me wonder if my voice was in his head as well, equally obnoxious, and whether he was permanently anxious that I would say something awful.

I felt a strange parallax, then, maybe a contact high. Looking at Josh, as he gulped down chips, we were the same person. For a moment I was sure that I had folded the donkeys piled on the table; I could even remember the technique. I was sure, also, that I could not feel my toes.

The moment passed.

“Goodnight, Josh,” I said. “Don’t eat yourself sick.”

“Ha, okay bro. Get some rest. You look like you need it.”

I went to my room and got under the covers, hoping to nod off before Joshua turned on his apnea machine.

Up Late

I found myself unable to work, or think, or work, but it wasn't just me. I stood and looked around and everyone was idle, just staring at their screens. We were supposed to be collating.

Eventually I got my hands to the keyboard, but instead of organizing sales abstracts, I wrote *I am like the yellow sclera of a screamer in a screaming crowd*. Then I clicked send. It group mailed, but no one complained and I wasn't reprimanded. No one responded at all.

I don't know where the rest of the day went. I have no memory of it and don't know if anyone else does either, so perhaps it no longer exists. It had been days since I'd gotten more than a few minutes of sleep, and time and space and motion were alloyed.

That evening I met Omar at the bar, our regular bar, a sports bar. It was uncomfortably quiet—the bartender had the jukebox low enough that it was easy to

notice how little anyone was speaking. She was playing soft stuff too, whale songs and Enya and Air Supply. Which was better than headaches, but it changed the texture of the room, dressed it in someone else's skin. The bar was almost full but everyone was intent on their drinks, murmuring instead of talking.

The players on the TVs were off their game too, taking wild shots and blinking at their misses, missing passes that bounced off shoes and knees, tripping each other, running into referees. It was a thing to watch, and if I'd been well I would've found it funny. But I hadn't laughed in days, hadn't heard anyone laugh in days except on TV.

Omar and I tried to talk some but mostly we drank, even though it was hard to muster the energy. We tried to pay the bartender correctly but who knows, she was just as hard-up as we were, trying to drink herself to sleep like the rest of us.

It would've been great if this scheme had worked, if we'd knocked ourselves out; and for a while it looked hopeful. We got dizzy and foggy, to the point where we couldn't stay on our barstools. But lying bruised on the floor I found my anxieties had not abated, and after a few seconds with his eyes closed Omar came writhing and vomiting awake.

"It was years," he said, coughing. "It lasted for years."

We spent the rest of the night listening to other drunks mumbling and crying, humming lullabies to each other. At some point the bartender stumbled to the door and turned off the lights. She didn't ask any of us to leave, just sat down with a bottle.

In the morning the bottle was empty. Her eyes were open but she wasn't breathing that we could see.

Eventually someone called 911, and told the room that an ambulance was coming, but nobody came. We waited an hour. Then I went behind the bar and drank two energy drinks and said I'd drive her to the hospital. Omar and I dragged her to my car as some of the others shuffled out into the daylight.

We knew she was dead, but she was also a friend...or acquaintance? It's hard to gauge things without sleep. Hard to judge.

The streets surrounding the hospital were full of empty cars so we carried her the last few blocks. The emergency room overflowed with people sitting and blinking at each other, or blinking away tears. They covered the floors. They might've filled the entire building, for all I know.

We left the bartender propped against an ambulance outside and picked our way to the receptionist. I told him we thought our friend was dead and he mouthed *lucky*, then told us where to go.

We carried her some number of blocks to an empty lot beside a strip mall, where perhaps a hundred bodies were piled haphazardly in the middle of dirt and yellow bushes. Omar said a few words.

"So...Lisa, or, ah, Lily...Elle? She died doing what she loved, I think. That's something. It's not nothing. She's sleeping now."

There was a diner nearby that seemed familiar, or just looked the way many diners look. It was empty but unlocked and Omar went behind the counter and said

he would make tea. A little while later he brought a mug out to the booth and sat beside me. The ceramic burnt my fingers and the water burnt my tongue but I did not set down the mug or stop drinking.

Newton

Their dinner table is long and made of a dark wood that I cannot identify, but which is certainly rare and expensive. Funny how this is clear to me, though I don't know anything about furniture. How there are these signals of class that I soak in and itemize without real awareness. I did not grow up with them, they were not present in the single-story houses of north Cedar Rapids. How is it that I can know their value now? Subconscious indoctrination from television or Instagram? Otherwise a mystery.

At the center of the table is a turquoise vase stuffed with flowers, or plastic things that look so much like fresh flowers I can't tell the difference. The table and vase will color my perception of this place and the people around the table even after I leave the room. These objects will occupy space in my brain for the rest of my life, perhaps, or I will forget them, or they will be obscured by neurodegeneration.

“Would you like some more wine, Arnold?” asks Jamie’s mother.

“No thank you,” I reply. “Maybe in a little bit.”

I am looking at the table and the flowers so as not to look at the people.

Jamie, my boyfriend—that’s what I’m calling him now—his parents, and also his teenage sister. All of them blond. They are eating and his parents and sister are talking and Jamie is looking at me and smiling in an encouraging way. He wants me to talk too. I smile back absently, bringing my fork to my mouth. I do not talk.

I am recreating a scene in my head—I am half-dreaming. This is what I do when I remember. It’s what everyone does. Inert memories are only sets of parameters that, when activated, become infused with imagination. People with photographic memories may have exceptionally detailed parameters: *Judy was wearing her blue shoes that day and Michael had his left hand in his pocket when he asked Alex who was wearing that tartan sweater and had a sty on his left lower eyelid whether he had started eating fish again or was he still too worried about Fukushima...* They might have a million points of reference for each scene, but the gaps between the points are still filled with imaginings, with a false number of eyelashes or shape of earrings. It’s the same part of the brain as when we’re making things up.

I don’t have a photographic memory. My brain is lossy. My parameters are vague. Right now I’m remembering, insofar as I’m able to, the last time I sat down with someone’s family in this context, as a *boyfriend*. The only other time. I was in high school, a junior, still dating girls, though I hadn’t dated many. It was something

I felt I was supposed to do more than something I wanted to do. I don't mean I was in the closet—I mean I was on so much lithium that I didn't know which room the closet was in. Sexual desire was an abstract for me. I was aware of the mechanics, had taken health classes, and had friends who, if not sexually active, certainly spent a lot of time alone with computers. I knew what teenage desire was supposed to look like, and I knew I how old I was.

So I took a few girls to movies and football games, girls with names I don't remember (another limitation: state-dependent memory. I am not on lithium now, so the memories I made while I was on it are calibrated to a different neurochemical framework, and no longer fit the shape of my brain). I remember Laura, though, because I went out with her more than once. She didn't seem to mind the pauses so much, the laggy and not always on-point responses to her bitter commentary on school life.

"You know who Tony Curtis is?" she asked, once.

"...I don't think so," I said, worrying that it was some bit of common knowledge I had missed.

"That's who Ms. Lemil sounds like. Voice of Tony Curtis, heart of a rabbit, body of a shot putter."

"Ms. Lemil has nice hair," I said, or something like that. "I like the way it springs in every direction. My aunt has hair like that. My aunt in Nebraska."

I would say things like that with lithium. Maybe not that exactly, because I don't remember things from back then exactly, but things like that; and most people

would pretend I hadn't said anything. Even my friends. Even Laura, sometimes, but she would also sometimes follow my train of thought. She might've asked about my aunt, for example, and listened to me try to describe her. She was nice in that way.

"How do you like Chicago?" asks Jamie's mother, and I look up. I can tell by the enthusiasm in her voice and eyes and mouth that she has inquired not out of curiosity but from a desire to maintain a certain mood at the table. Or she's trying to be kind. She wants me to be talking, is the only thing that's sure, and I can tell from Jamie's face that he badly wants the same.

I say, "It's nice. It's different from Iowa. I mean, of course it's different from Iowa, ha. There's more to do. I like the lake, the skyline, the museums."

"A lot more accepting too, yeah?" says Jamie's father, with what I guess is a knowing look, a close-lipped smile with arched eyebrows. Jamie rolls his eyes.

I laugh and say, "Oh, Cedar Rapids isn't so bad. But sure, I have friends from small towns who had real trouble, really sad stories. Those are everywhere, though. I didn't mind Iowa, I just needed a change." I am a little red, I think. It happens when I talk around things.

Jamie's mother seems to register my discomfort. "Well, anyway, we're glad you're here now," she says. "You're all Jim's been talking about." They talk a lot, I know.

I smile at her appreciatively, then look at Jamie, who, already blushing, blushes harder. Everyone around the table has turned a shade of pink. My plate is lavender embossed with green ivy. I resume eating. Garlicky chicken, tasty. I take

small bites.

I do not like fish, which is why I remember the meal at Laura's house: tilapia in lemon. Distaste fixes things in our minds. After the first bite I had said something like "Wow, this is really good," and possibly her father told me the dish was Middle Eastern, and I told him I didn't know they had fish there, I thought it was all desert, and he talked about aquaculture as I picked slivery cartilaginous bones from the filet. No one else at the table seemed to have this problem, and I wasn't sure if they had a technique to avoid the bones, or were just eating them along with the flesh.

Laura and I were, I'm sure, asked about school, and talked about school, and knowing each other through math club, playing complex Chinese card games we learned from Zhou, the team captain. I was likely wearing my only button down shirt and trying very hard to present as normal. Possibly I succeeded, or else her parents were so happy that she had brought someone home that they ignored my weirdness. Laura was at that point plain, remarkably plain; small and skinny with a sharp nose and dirty blond hair done in something like a bowl cut. I'm friends with her now on Facebook and she's very much grown into herself, always with a new boyfriend, always happy. But back then she was quite lonely, or anyway I thought she was.

After dinner we went to the living room and her father gave us each a bottle of beer before getting one for himself. Her mother drank something else. I don't know if Laura drank regularly with her parents back then. She didn't seem like the type. I don't know if they would've given me the beer if they'd known I was taking

lithium. I certainly hadn't told them, or Laura, or anyone at school. In any case I don't think it was the beer that messed things up. I think it was just something that was going to happen.

In the living room of Jamie's parents house I have another glass of wine. I'm not taking any medication anymore, so there are no interactions to worry about except the basic one, blood and alcohol. His teenage sister is not offered a glass, and leaves for her room. Jamie and I sit together on the couch but do not hold hands. He squeezed my shoulder once as I sat, smiling again, but otherwise we don't touch. We talk to his parents about life, as though we're adult as they are.

Laura's parents sat together on their couch, while she and I occupied the matched green armchairs adjacent to it, facing each other. We also tried to talk like adults. We discussed colleges, and career paths. Laura's father described his job at Mercy, the same hospital where I went for therapy. I think he was an X-ray tech, her dad, but while he talked I mostly thought of the psychiatry offices at the hospital. His stories of objects lodged in surprising places, or whatever, failed to hold my interest. But I was good at pretending to be interested, back then.

In those days my attention was almost constantly split, never thinking about just one thing. It focused a moment later, though. Or was it longer than that? Laura's mother had at some point directed the conversation away from work, toward family vacations, talking about Lake Okoboji. Summers at Okoboji.

"We used to go there with Pete and Tammy and Newton," she said, and from that point I remember clearly what happened. I knew those names. "Laura said you

and Newton used to be close?" She looked at me with some sort of expectation, or hidden emotion; with knowledge that she was broaching a sensitive subject.

"Yes," I said, automatically, but I couldn't think of anything else and just froze with my mouth open. It was like I was on a TV show, something with hidden cameras.

"He's our nephew," Laura's father said, when it became clear I was finished talking.

I turned to Laura, who had a look of intense discomfort. I noticed a faint resemblance to him, once it was mentioned. The sharp nose and the skinny blondeness. How could she not have told me she was his cousin? Or had she? I wasn't sure. I'm not sure.

"How is he?" I asked, though I wanted badly not to know.

"Better. A lot better," Laura's mother said. I did not trust her, the way she said it. "Almost like his old self. You should give him a call, or write him a letter, I'm sure he'd like that."

Laura was not looking at me, was looking at the coffee table.

"That's good," I said, looking at the empty dining room, "That's a good idea."

The last time I'd seen him had been two weeks after he'd come out of his coma, three weeks after the car accident. His parents had been braced by seatbelts and airbags, but Newton, unbuckled in the middle back, had sailed between them, headfirst into the windshield. After that he spent a week almost dying, a week sleeping, and another a week watching TV and not saying anything.

When I visited his hospital room, the last time, his neck was stabilized and his forehead was all in bandages with some intricate metal scaffolding centered around a spot above his left ear. I didn't cry anymore when I saw him, I hadn't cried since he woke up. I said hi to his mom, sitting beside him, and she smiled at me, just as horrible a smile as you might imagine. I smiled back, then walked to the bed, and said, "Hi Newton," and waved.

He looked at me, and for the first time in a month I saw him open his mouth to speak.

"Ah-," he started, and there was a flare of hope, a certainty that he was about to say *Arnold*. Relief began exploding inside my head. But he didn't say Arnold. The vowels didn't stop, drool came, his eyes fell back toward the television.

I turned and left the room before the sound stopped, accelerated wordlessly past my mom—who must've apologized to Newton's mother before following me—and ran down multiple flights of stairs, out the sliding doors, to the loading area where I vomited into a planter and sobbed. Two nurses comforted me without putting down their cigarettes, until my mom found me.

I was twelve and not on anything yet, is why I remember. We were both twelve. He had been my best friend for two years, since the beginning of sixth grade. For two years we had been constantly together, or anticipating being together again. I don't remember why we were so close, just the feeling I had when he was around, or I guess that feeling was the reason.

I know we met through Pop Warner, our first middle school practice. I caught

a pass and ran through him, hard, but he didn't get angry. "Sweet catch," he said, adjusting his pinnie, smiling with what looks to me now, in my head, like honest joy, no trace of animosity. It's hard to believe, in retrospect. I don't know if I should believe it.

I want to say I fell in love with him then, but that's only because I can't find the words to describe what I actually felt, which was not love. I felt happy, I know, I felt very happy, but it wasn't a feeling I connected to him, then.

I can't remember much after that, only random images. Playing video games together in my basement. Water guns, hand-fighting, slushies at an R-rated movie. Sneaking a beer from a cooler in the backseat of his brother's car, his arm around my shoulders, a closeness I wasn't used to with anyone. No words. It bothers me that I don't remember any words except those two. *Sweet catch*. How stupid of me.

Another thing about memories: they fade if they're not accessed regularly, and I don't talk about Newton with anybody. Didn't with Laura's parents, who wanted to reminisce, who tried to talk about his comic book collection; whose house I fled after excusing myself to the bathroom and dry-heaving for three minutes. Didn't with Laura, who I avoided after that night, turning away whenever she approached.

Certainly don't with Jamie, who looks maybe a little like Newton would've, blond and skinny with a prominent nose. Nothing like the apparition I encountered a year ago, just before I left Iowa, at a bar near my parents' house. A doughy man my age with lank yellow hair who asked, wide-eyed, in oddly cadenced too-careful

words, if he knew me.

I am not crying now, but I must look sad because Jamie's mother asks if I'm all right.

"Oh," I say, shaking my head. "I'm fine, just a stray memory. It's gone now."

VITA

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